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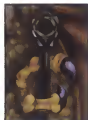
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B15B-06

Volume 66, Number 2
(Whole Number 559)
June 1991

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AMAZING® Stories (ISSN 0279-1706) is published monthly by TSR, Inc., P.O. Box 1111 (201 Shendan Springs Road), Lake Geneva WI 53147.

Subscriptions: The price of a subscription is \$30 for 12 issues (one year) sent to U.S. or Canadian addresses. For subscriptions sent to all other countries, the rates are \$50 for surface mail or \$90 for air mail.

Note: All subscriptions must be paid in advance in U.S. funds only. Prices are subject to change without notice. All subscription orders should be sent to TSR, Inc., P.O. Box 5695, Boston MA 02206.

Distribution: AMAZING Stories is available in bookstores and other retail outlets. Distribution to the book trade in the United States is by Random House, Inc.; in Canada by Random House of Canada, Ltd.; and in the United Kingdom by TSR Ltd.

Submissions: AMAZING Stories welcomes unsolicited submissions of fiction manuscripts. Guidelines for fiction writers are available by sending a #10 SASE to the Lake Geneva address. Illustrators and writers of nonfiction should query first and provide samples of published work.

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Second class postage paid at Lake Geneva, Wis., and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to TSR, Inc., P.O. Box 1111, Lake Geneva WI 53147.

What We're Up To

Kim Mohan

Right off the bat, I can think of three ways to tackle the topic of this column. First of all, by actual count . . .

What We're Up To is Number 2 (if you're a revisionist) or Number 559 (if you're a traditionalist). From the low-numbered viewpoint:

After months of planning and preparation, the new-format version of AMAZING* Stories is finally in monthly production, and no one is more pleased about that than the people who've been doing the planning and preparation. We're extremely proud of how the new magazine looks, and very happy with the stories and features we've gotten into the first two new-format issues. Now you've had a chance to see what we've been up to, and we hope you like what you see enough to become a subscriber; or, at least, we hope that you'll like each issue enough to go back to the store next month for another helping.

Of course, we have no way of being *sure* that you're going to like what you see. Because—let's face it—we don't know you very well at all . . . yet. In the assembling of these early magazines, we have made some assumptions and some well-considered judgments; we have used our professional skills to arrive at decisions we feel good about.

For the last several months, we've been operating without a lot of input from the outside world—except for hundreds of manuscript submissions. We've accepted the stories we

liked the most, putting faith in our taste and our judgment—because at the time, those were the only resources we had to call upon.

But now we're ready and eager to get input from readers as well as writers. You can see what we're doing; you can decide for yourself if we're headed in the right direction. And if you communicate with us, you can help determine whether the magazine changes direction or shifts gears. Now's the time to decide these things, before the new, low-numbered version gains any more momentum.

What we're up to—the goal we're trying to achieve—is just what every other professional magazine publisher in the world tries to do: to put out a periodical that meets the needs and satisfies the desires of as many people as possible, and then keeps on being satisfying issue after issue.

Now we're moving into the cut-to-the-chase approach, which goes something like this: What we're up to is trying to make a magazine you will want to *buy*. Why is the goal of all professional magazine publishers (as stated above) so important, and so universal? Simple: Magazines don't succeed unless they *sell*.

Personally and professionally, I don't much care how you came to be reading these words right now. If you got this magazine as part of your subscription or if you bought it in a store, then I thank you for your good taste and your support of what

we're trying to do. If you borrowed it from a friend or if you're reading it in a library or a waiting room somewhere, then I'm glad we were able to pique your interest.

First of all, we need *readers*—and I'm glad you're already one of those. But running a very close second is our need for *purchasers*. The question I'm asking you to answer, after you've finished as much of this magazine as you plan to read, is this: If you had it to do over again, would you spend money to get your own copy of it?

If your answer is no, then please take a few minutes and invest in a 29¢ stamp to tell us why not. In order for us to have any chance of winning you back, we have to know what you didn't like.

If your answer is yes, then please tell us what you *did* like—not for the sake of feeding our egos, but to help us get a balanced picture of how *all* our readers feel. If the only feedback we get is negative, we have no way of knowing when our critics are in the minority and when they're not.

Publishing is a business. Like any other business, this one exists in order to make money. We're not involved in the production of one of the necessities of life, such as food or clothing—although even if we were, we'd still have to put out something that you thought was worth the money. But because what we produce is not a necessity—and

(Continued on page 95)

Reflections

Robert Silverberg

Editor's Note:

Within days after he heard the news of Don Wollheim's death last November, Bob Silverberg had this piece of writing in our hands. But because the publishing schedule of AMAZING® Stories was going through some drastic changes at that time, it wasn't possible for us to get this column into print until now.

Even though the event that triggered this "Reflection" occurred months ago, we don't think it's possible for what Mr. Silverberg says to go out of date. The words are as relevant today as they were the day he wrote them. And we'd like to echo the sentiments expressed herein; Don Wollheim will never really be gone from the field of science fiction, but his personal presence will be sorely missed.

—

One of the great figures of American science fiction died last fall, an editor who put his mark on it as indelibly as John W. Campbell or Hugo Gernsback. Their names are legendary; his may not be familiar to you at all. It was Donald A. Wollheim.

Donald who? you ask. Yes, very likely you do. It's a name known mainly on the inside, within the profession.

But consider these things:

Have you ever read a paperback novel by C. J. Cherryh, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Andre Norton, or Tanith Lee? The chances are good

that it was published by DAW Books, then. That was Don Wollheim's distinctive publishing company, which bore his initials: Donald A. Wollheim. Since its founding some twenty years ago it has published hundreds of sf and fantasy novels, most of them the kind of colorful, richly imaginative adventure stories that Wollheim loved, and in that time it has won thousands of new admirers of that distinctively Wollheimian brand of fiction.

Have you ever read a science-fiction anthology? Wollheim edited the first one that achieved mass-market publication: *The Pocket Book of Science Fiction* of 1943, a magnificent collection of classic stories by Heinlein, Sturgeon, H. G. Wells, and others. My impressionable young mind was haunted for days by images out of T. S. Stribling's "The Green Splotches" from that collection. Wollheim edited the first anthology of original sf too, *The Girl With the Hungry Eyes*, in 1947, with great stories by Fritz Leiber, William Tenn, and other top-notchers of the period.

Have you seen those newfangled double-novel books that Tor has been publishing, the kind that have a novel by Silverberg on one side and one by Jack Vance or Gene Wolfe bound upside-down on the other, so that whichever way you turn it a cover painting faces you? Don Wollheim invented those in 1953, when he was the editor of Ace Books; they were called Ace Double

Books. Among the writers who got their first paperback audiences in those back-to-back books were Philip K. Dick, Samuel R. Delany, John Brunner, Leigh Brackett, Poul Anderson, Ursula K. Le Guin, Harlan Ellison, Brian W. Aldiss, and a guy named Silverberg. Over on the reprint side, Ace offered the first paperback editions of Asimov's *Foundation* series, Robert E. Howard's Conan books, and A. E. van Vogt's Null-A novels.

Or—speaking of first paperback editions—have you ever read a fantasy trilogy? The books of Stephen Donaldson, say, or David Eddings, or any one of a hundred others, going back to the ancestor of them all, J. R. R. Tolkien? There was a time when no paperback company published fantasy at all, no one, nobody at all. It didn't sell, they said. There was no public for it. Then Don Wollheim's Ace Books brought out a reprint of *Lord of the Rings*, and the rest is publishing history.

(It wasn't, by the way, an authorized paperback reprint. Wollheim had tried to buy reprint rights to the Tolkien trilogy from its American hardcover publisher, but they turned him down: paperbacks were tacky, they thought. They didn't want to deal with a little house like Ace. Whereupon Wollheim, who had already observed that the hardcover house hadn't bothered to obtain proper copyright protection for the Tolkien books, simply published them without permission. It was a

controversial thing to do; but Don Wollheim never minded being controversial. His edition of the trilogy met with such success that the hard-cover publisher hastily authorized Ballantine Books to do a legitimate reprint edition of a slightly revised text, and Ace's books went out of print. But without that push from Wollheim, Tolkien probably never would have made it into paperback in this country—and publishers would still be telling each other solemnly that there was no mass-market audience for fantasy novels.)

To continue: have you ever read any of the novels of A. Merritt? C. S. Lewis's *Silent Planet* trilogy? The stories of H. P. Lovecraft? Before Wollheim ran Ace, he was the editor at the pioneering paperback house, Avon Books—and it was there, between 1947 and 1951, that he put the work of those great fantasists into newsstand editions that won wide audiences for these previously obscure writers.

During the Avon years, also, Wollheim edited a quarterly magazine, *The Avon Fantasy Reader*—for which he ransacked the yellowing pages of *Weird Tales*, *Argosy*, and other classic fiction magazines of the 1920's and 1930's, giving new life to the fiction of Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard, William Hope Hodgson, C. L. Moore, and dozens of others.

Going back still further: his first editing job, in 1941, was to run two low-budget short-lived pulp magazines, *Cosmic Stories* and *Stirring Science Stories*. Perhaps "low-budget" is a little too euphemistic: the contributors didn't get paid anything at all for their fiction, though Wollheim promised to come through with small checks for them if the magazines survived past the first few issues. Since no professionals would write on that basis, Wollheim turned to his friends in the world of New York science-fiction fandom for his material. His friends at that time included C. M. Kornbluth, Isaac Asimov, Damon Knight, James Blish, and Frederik Pohl, all of them just beginning their migrations from fandom to professional writing. You'll find some of their earliest (if not

their best) stories in the pages of *Cosmic* and *Stirring*.

My own debt to Don Wollheim, both as reader and writer, was enormous. The kind of science fiction he most loved—rich in wonder and imagination, depicting in vivid detail sweeping vistas of the infinite—was the kind most likely to appeal to my developing mind when I was eleven or twelve years old. Which was how old I was when I stumbled upon an early Wollheim anthology, *Portable Novels of Science*, in Macy's book department one afternoon not long after World War II. I remember staying up half the night to finish Olaf Stapledon's "Odd John," which seemed to speak to me personally (as it has to every overbright maladjusted kid who has ever read it); and then I went right on to devour John Taine's "Before the Dawn," that magnificent portrayal of dinosaur life, and Lovecraft's spooky and wondrous "The Shadow Out of Time," and by the time I finally dozed off over H. G. Wells's "The First Men in the Moon," somewhere around two or three in the morning, my soul had been irrevocably altered. A literary virus had invaded it; and it was Don Wollheim who put it there, as he did for an entire generation of impressionable readers who grew up to be the writers you've cherished for decades.

In person he could be difficult: abrasive and passionately opinionated, a fierce ideological combatant, a vehement holder of grudges. Behind the abrasiveness, though, he was actually a shy and likeable man, as his long-time friends can attest; but that wasn't always readily apparent to outsiders. Even within his own circle he made many enemies along the way and he rarely forgave them, and when you visited his office, as I often did thirty-five years ago, he would regale you with accounts of their iniquities and shortcomings in a highly pungent way.

I suppose I was one of those enemies for a while, because, like nearly everyone who dealt with him in his early days as an editor, I ultimately disappointed him by moving on to other publishers. At the beginning of my career, in the mid-1950's,

I quickly struck up a relationship with Wollheim and he published many of my earliest novels. We had lunch together many times at a German restaurant around the corner from the Ace office in Manhattan, where I listened in awe as he fulminated about the failings of other editors and writers; now and then I was the guest of Don and his devoted wife Elsie at their book-crammed house in Queens; and whenever I turned in a book, there was always a new contract forthcoming. But eventually my skills matured to the point where I could approach such publishing houses as Doubleday and Ballantine, for whom I could do longer and more complex books than I had been doing for Don (and get paid more, too). And I suspect that at that point I joined the long list of those who had let Don Wollheim down, and I have no doubt that for a long time thereafter he had bitter things to say about me to anyone who would listen.

But the bitterness, if it was there, was wholly one-sided. I never felt anything but affection for this prickly, difficult, complicated man, and gratitude for all that he had done in revealing the wonders of science fiction to me and in shaping my career. And after a time whatever grudge he may have borne against me went away, and we enjoyed some amiable times together—notably at the 1988 World Science Fiction Convention in New Orleans, where—at least fifteen or twenty years after this high distinction should have come to him—he was Guest of Honor.

His last few years were marred by serious medical problems and his death, at the age of 76, came as a welcome release. We ought not let his passing go unrecognized. For more than fifty years this seriously underrated figure devoted his life and formidable energies to the development of the field we love. He was one of the great shapers of science-fiction publishing in the United States. ♦

Victoria

Paul Di Filippo



Illustration by N. Taylor Blanchard

I was tired, so I slipped away.

—Queen Victoria, in her private journal

1. Politics At Midnight

A rod of burnished copper, affixed by a laboratory vise grip, rose from the corner of the claw-footed desk, which was topped with the finest Moroccan leather. At the height of fifteen inches the rod terminated in a gimbaled joint which allowed a second extension full freedom of movement in nearly a complete sphere of space. A third length of rod, mated to the first two with a second joint, ended in a fitting shaped to accommodate a writer's grip: four finger grooves and a thumb recess. Projecting from this fitting was a fountain-pen nib.

The flickering, hissing gaslights of the comfortable secluded picture-hung study gleamed along the length of this contraption, giving the mechanism a lambent, buttery glow. Beyond rich draperies adorning the large study windows, a hint of cholera-laden London fog could be detected, thick swirls coiling and looping like Byzantine plots.

The sad, lonely clapping of a brace of horses pulling the final late omnibus of the Wimbledon, Merton and Tooting line dimly penetrated the study, reinforcing its sense of pleasant seclusion from the world.

Beneath the nib at the end of its long arm of rods was a canted pallet. The pallet rode on an intricate system of toothed tracks mounted atop the desk, and was advanced by a hand crank on the left. A roll of paper protruded from cast iron brackets at the head of the pallet. The paper, coming down over the writing surface, was taken up by a roller at the bottom of the pallet. This roller was also activated by the hand crank, in synchrony with the movement of the pallet across the desk.

On the floor in the knee-well of the desk was a glass jug full of ink. From the stoppered jug rose an India-rubber hose, extending upward into the brass tubing and thence to the nib. A foot-activated pump forced ink out of the bottle and into the system at an appropriate rate.

Fitted into the center of this elaborate writing mechanism was the ingenious and eccentric engine that drove it.

Cosmo Cowperthwait.

Cowperthwait was a thin young gentleman with a ruddy complexion and sandy hair, a mere twenty-five years old. He was dressed in finery that bespoke a comfortable income: paisley jacket, cravat, embroidered waistcoat, trig trousers.

Pulling a large turnip-watch from his waistcoat pocket, Cowperthwait adjusted its setting to agree with the 11:45 passage of the Tooting omnibus. Restoring the watch to his pocket, he tugged down the Naturopathic corset he wore next to his skin. The bulky garment, with its many sewn-in herbal lozenges, had a tendency to ride up from his midriff to just under his armpits.

Now Cowperthwait's somewhat moony face fell into an expression of complete absorption, as he composed his thoughts prior to transcribing them. Right hand holding the pen at the end of its long arm, left hand gripping the crank, right foot ready to activate the pump, Cow-

perthwait sought to master the complex emotions attendant upon the latest visit to his Victoria.

Finally he seemed to have sufficiently arrayed his cogitations. Lowering his head, he plunged into his composition. The crank spun, the pump sucked, the pallet inched crabwise across the desk along an algebraic path resembling the Pearl of Sluze, the arm swung to and fro, the paper travelled below the nib, and the ink flowed out into words.

Only by means of this fantastic machinery—which he had been forced to contrive himself—was Cowperthwait able to keep up with the wonted speedy pace of his feverish naturalist's brain.

May 29, 1838

V. seems happy in her new home, insofar as I am able to ascertain from her limited—albeit hauntingly attractive—physiognomy and guttural vocables. I am assured by Madame de Mallet that she is not being abused, in terms of the frequency of her male visitors, nor in the nature of their individual attentions. In fact, the pitiable thing seems to thrive on the physical attention. She certainly appeared robust and hearty when I checked in on her today, with a fine slick epidermis that seems to draw one's fascinated touch. (Madame de Mallet appears to be following my instructions to the letter, regarding the necessity for keeping V.'s skin continually moist. There was a large atomizer of French manufacture within easy reach, which V. understood how to use.)

Taking her pulse, I was again astonished at the fragility of her bones. As I bent over her, she laid one hand with those long thin flexible, slightly webbed digits across my brow, and I nearly swooned.

It is for the best, I again acknowledged to myself, to have her out of the house. Best for her, and above all, best for me and the equilibrium of my nerves, not to mention my bodily constitution.

As for her diet, there is now established a steady relationship with a throng of local urchins who, for tuppence apiece daily, are willing to trap the requisite insects. I have also taught them how to skim larval masses from the many pestilential pools of standing water scattered throughout the poorer sections of the city. The boys' pay is taken from V.'s earnings, although I let it be known that, should her patronage ever slacken, there would be no question of my meeting the expenses connected with her maintenance.

It seems a shame that my experiments had to end in this manner. I had, of course, no way of knowing that the carnal appetites of the hellbender would prove so insusceptible to restraint, nor her mind so unamenable to education. I feel a transcendent guilt in having ever brought into this world such a monster of nature. My only hope now is that her life will not be overly prolonged. Although as to the proper life span of her smaller kin, I am in doubt, as the authorities differ considerably.

God above! First my parents' demise, and now this, both horrible incidents traceable directly to my

lamentable scientific dabbings. Can it be that my honest desire to improve the lot of mankind is in reality only a kind of doomed hubris?

Cowperthwait laid his head down on the pallet and began quietly to sob. He did not often indulge in such self-pity, but the late hour and the events of the day had combined to unman his usual stern scientific stoicism.

His temporary descent into grief was interrupted by a peremptory knock on his study door. Cowperthwait's attitude altered. He sat up and answered the interruption with manifest irritation.

"Yes, yes, Nails, just come in."

The door opened and Cowperthwait's manservant entered.

Nails McGroaty—expatriate American who boasted a personal history out of which a whole mythology could have been composed—was the general factotum of the Cowperthwait household. Stableman, trapdriver, butler, groundskeeper, chef, bodyguard—McGroaty fulfilled all these functions and more, carrying them out with admirable expedience and utility, albeit in a roughshod manner.

Cowperthwait now saw upon McGroaty's face as he stood in the doorway an expression of unusual reverence. The man rubbed his stubbled jaw nervously with one hand before speaking.

"It's a visitor for you, ol' toff."

"At this unholy hour? Has he a card?"

McGroaty advanced and handed over the pasteboard.

Cowperthwait could hardly believe his eyes. The token announced none other than William Lamb, Second Viscount Melbourne.

The Prime Minister. And, if the scandalous gossip currently bumping up London could be credited, the lover of England's pretty nineteen-year-old Queen, on the throne just this past year. At this particular point in time, he was perhaps the most powerful man in the Empire.

"Did he say what he wanted?"

"Nope."

"Well, for Linnaeus's sake, don't just stand there. Show him in."

McGroaty made to do so. At the door, he paused.

"I done et supper a dog's age ago already, figgerin' as how you wouldn't take kindly to bein' disturbed. But I left some for you. It's an eel-pie. Not as tasty as what I could've cobbled up if'n I had some fresh rattle, but not half bad."

Then he was gone. Cowperthwait shook his head with amusement. The man was hardly civilized. But loyal as a dog.

In a moment, Viscount Melbourne, Prime Minister of an Empire that stretched nearly around the globe, from Vancouver to Hyderabad, stood shaking hands with a baffled Cowperthwait.

At age fifty-nine, Melbourne was still possessed of dazzling good looks. Among those numerous women whose company he enjoyed, his eyes and the set of his head were particularly admired. His social talents were exceptional, his wit odd and mordant.

Despite all these virtues and his worldly successes, Melbourne was not a happy man. In fact, Cowperthwait was immediately struck by the famous Melbourne melancholia. He knew the source well enough, as did all of London.

Against the wishes of his family, Melbourne had married the lovely, eccentric and wilful Lady Caroline Ponsonby, only daughter of Lady Bessborough. Having made herself a public scandal by her unrequited passion for the rake and poet, George Gordon, Lord Byron (to whom she had ironically been introduced by none other than her own mother-in-law, Elizabeth Lamb), she had ultimately provoked Melbourne to the inevitable separation, despite his legendary patience, forbearance and forgiveness. Thereafter, Lady Caroline became so excitable as to be insane, dying ten years ago in 1828. Their son Augustus, an only child, proved feeble-minded and died a year later.

As if this recent scandal were not enough, Melbourne still had to contend against persistent decades-old rumors that his father had in reality been someone other than the First Viscount Melbourne, and hence the son held his title unjustifiably.

Enough tragedy for a lifetime. And yet, Cowperthwait sensed, Melbourne stood on the edge of yet further setbacks, perhaps personal, perhaps political, perhaps a mix of both.

"Please, Prime Minister, won't you take a seat?"

Melbourne pulled up a baize-bottomed chair and wearily sat. "Between us two, Mister Cowperthwait, with the information I am about to share, there must be as little formality as possible. Therefore, I entreat you to call me William, and I shall call you Cosmo. After all, I knew your father casually, and honored his accomplishments for our country. It's not as if we were total strangers, you and I, separated by a huge social gap."

Cowperthwait's head was spinning. He had no notion of why the P.M. was here, or what he could possibly be about to impart. "By all means . . . William. Would you care for something to drink?"

"Yes, I think I would."

Cowperthwait gratefully took the occasion to rise and compose his demeanor. He advanced to a speaking tube protruding from a brass panel set into the wall. He pulled several ivory-handled knobs labelled with various rooms of the house until a bell rang at his end, signalling that McGroaty had been contacted. The last knob pulled had been labelled *PRIVY*.

The squeaky, distant voice of the manservant emerged from the tube. "What's up, Coz?"

Cowperthwait bit his tongue at this familiarity, repressing a justly merited rebuke. "Would you be so good as to bring us two shandygaffs, Nails."

"Comin' up, Guv."

McGroaty shortly appeared, bearing a tray with the drinks. A bone toothpick protruded from his lips and his shirttails were hanging out. He insouciantly deposited his burden and left.

After they had enjoyed a sip of their beer-and-ginger-beer mixed drinks, the Prime Minister began to speak.

"I believe, Cosmo, that you are, shall we say, the guardian of a creature known as Victoria, who now resides in a brothel run by Madame de Mallet."

Cowperthwait began to choke on his drink. Melbourne rose and patted his back until he recovered.

"How—how did you—?"

"Oh, come now, Cosmo, surely you realize that de Mallet's is patronized by the *bon ton*, and that your relationship to the creature could not fail to become public knowledge within a few days of her establishment there."

"I wasn't aware—"

"I must say," Melbourne continued, running a wet finger around the rim of his glass, thereby producing an annoying high-pitched whine, "that the creature provides a novel sensual experience. I thought I had experienced everything the act of copulation had to offer, but I was not prepared for your Victoria. Evidently, I am not alone in appreciating what I take to be her quite mindless skills. In just the past week, I've run into many figures of note at de Mallet's who were there expressly for her services. Those scribblers, Dickens and Tennyson. Louis Napoléon and the American Ambassador. Several of my own Cabinet, including some old buggers I thought totally celibate. Did you know that even that cerebral and artistic gent, John Ruskin, was there? Some friends of his had brought him. It was his first time, and they managed to convince him that all women were as hairless as your Victoria. I predict some trouble should he ever marry."

"I am not responsible—"

Melbourne ceased to toy with his glass. "Tell me—exactly what is she?"

Having no idea where Melbourne's talk was leading, Cowperthwait felt relieved to be asked for scientific information. "Credit it or not, William, Victoria is a newt."

"A newt? As in salamander?"

"Quite. To be precise, a hellbender, *Cryptobranchus alleganiensis*, a species which flourishes in the New World."

"I take it she has been, ah, modified. . . ."

"Of course. In my work with native newts, I have succeeded, you see, in purifying what I refer to as a 'growth factor.' Distilled from the pituitary, thyroid and endocrine glands, it has the results you see. I decided to apply it to a hellbender, since they normally attain a size of eighteen inches anyway, and managed to obtain several cfts from an agent abroad."

"And yet she does not look merely like a gigantic newt. The breasts alone. . . ."

"No, her looks are a result of an admixture of newt and human growth factors. Fresh cadavers—"

"Please, say no more. Although here in a semiprivate capacity, I am still a representative of the law."

"It was my intention to test the depths of her intellect, and see if I could educate her. In the end, she proved lamentably intractable. Not wishing to destroy her, I had no choice other than de Mallet's."

"Why, if I may ask, did you name her Victoria? Was it a bad joke? Are you aware that in so doing you might have been guilty of *lèse majesté*?"

Cowperthwait was taken aback. "No, no, it was nothing of the sort. A chance resemblance to the new Queen, a desire to dedicate my scientific researches to her—"

Melbourne held up a hand. "I believe you. You need go no further."

There was silence in the study for a time. Then Melbourne spoke, apparently on an unrelated topic.

"When the Queen came to the throne a year ago, she was incredibly naive and unsophisticated. Not lacking a basic intelligence, she had been reared in a stifling and cloistered atmosphere by her mother, the Duchess of Kent. My God, all she could talk about was horses and tating! She was totally tied to the apronstrings of her conniving mother and the Duchess's Irish lover, John Conroy."

"I soon realized that, in her current condition, she would never do as the matriarch of our nation. It was up to me to form her personality along more regal lines, for the good of the Empire."

"I knew that the quickest way to do so involved becoming her lover."

"I will not bore you with the rest of my tactics. Suffice it to say that I believe I have succeeded in sharpening the Queen's wits and instincts, to the point where she will now make an admirable ruler, perhaps the greatest this sceptered isle has ever known."

"I fail to see—"

"Wait. There is more. I have steadily increased the Queen's work schedule, to the point where her day is taken up with reading dispatches and listening to her ministers. I thought she was bearing up admirably. However, I now fear I might have taken things too fast. The Duchess and Conroy have been bedeviling her lately with picaune demands. In addition, she has been nervous about her coronation, scheduled for next month. Lately in bed together she has been complaining about feeling poorly and faint, miserable and nauseous. I'm afraid I brushed off these sentiments as idle vapor."

"Surely you could let up a little on the poor girl. . . ."

Melbourne passed a hand across his brow. "I fear it's too late for that."

"The Queen, you see, has just this day fled the throne."

Cowperthwait could scarcely give credence to his ears. "Impossible. Are you sure she has not been kidnapped, or injured while riding? A search party must be mounted—"

"No, it's useless. She's not lying senseless on some bridle trail somewhere, she's gone to ground like the cunning vixen she is. Certain personal items are missing, including her diary. To rouse a general search would only insure that her abdication became public knowledge in a few hours. And with political matters as they stand, Britain cannot afford even temporarily to be without a sovereign. Schleswig-Holstein, the Landgravine of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, the Spanish Succession. . . . No, it's impossible that we advertise the disappearance. There are members of the nobility who would like nothing better than such a scandal. I am thinking particularly of

Lord Chuting-Payne. And besides, I don't want Victoria to lose the throne. I have a conviction about that girl. I think she's going to make a splendid monarch. This adolescent impetuosity should not be held against her."

"Oh, I agree," said Cowperthwait heartily. "But why come to me? How can I help?"

"I am asking you to contribute the services of your Victoria. I want her as a stand-in for the Queen, until the real Victoria can be found."

"That's ludicrous," expostulated Cowperthwait. "A new sitting on the throne of England? Oh, I concede that with a wig, she might deceive from a distance. But up close—never! Why not just bring in another human woman, perhaps of low degree, who would impersonate the Queen and keep silent for a fee?"

"And run the risk of future blackmail, or perhaps of capricious misuse by the actress of her assumed position? No, thank you, Cosmo. And despite what people say of me in connection with the Tolpuddle Martyrs, I am unwilling to have such a woman later assassinated to preserve the secret. No, I need a mannequin, someone utterly pliable. Only your Victoria fits the bill. Loan her to me, and I'll handle the rest."

"It's all so strange. . . . What can I say?"

"Simply say yes, and the nation and I will be forever in your debt."

"Well, if you put it that way—"

Melbourne shot to his feet. "Wonderful. You have no idea how relieved I am. Why, perhaps my Victoria, weary of playing commoner, might even now be on her way back to Buckingham Palace. But in the meantime, let us go secure your Victoria from her bed at de Mal'tels. You understand that you'll have to fetch her, for I cannot be seen bringing her away."

"Oh, of course. . . ."

Only when they were in the shuttered landau driven by McGroarty, rattling across the nighted town, with the womanly new Victoria seated daintily between them, a veil demurely drawn across her elongated features, did Cowperthwait think to tell Melbourne about the peculiar diet of his charge.

"Flies?" said the Prime Minister dubiously.

"Fresh," said Cowperthwait.

"I assume the stables—"

"I can see, sir," complimented Cowperthwait, "how you became Prime Minister."

2. A Train Straight To China

The grandstand was draped with gay bunting in gold and blue. Local personages of note, politicians and members of the railroad corporation, sat in orderly rows on the wooden platform, the women in their full bombazine skirts protecting themselves from the summer sun with frilly parasols. A brass band played sprightly tunes. Birds trilled counterpoint from nearby branches. A crowd of farmers and merchants, their wives and children, filled the broad meadow around the grandstand.

Pecklers hawked lemonade and candy, flowers and souvenir trinkets.

The place was the small village of Letchworth, north of London; the year, 1834, shortly after the passage of the Poor Law, which would transform the rural landscape, sequestering its beggars into institutions. The occasion was the inauguration of a new rail line, a spur off the London-Cambridge main.

A few yards from the grandstand lay the gleaming new rails, stretching off to the horizon. The stone foundation of the station, its brick superstructure only half completed and surrounded by scaffolding, stood south of the scene.

On the rails—massive, proud, powerful—rested an engine of revolutionary design. Not far off nervously hovered its revolutionary designer, Cosmo Cowperthwait, age twenty-one.

Next to Cowperthwait stood a fellow only slightly older, but possessed of a much greater flair and obvious sense of self-confidence. This was the twenty-eight-year-old Isambard Kingdom Brunel, son of the famous architect and inventor Marc Isambard Brunel, genius behind the Thames Tunnel, the first underwater construction to employ shield technology.

The association between the Cowperthwaits and the Brunels went back a generation.

Clive Cowperthwait, Cosmo's father, had been engaged to the lovely Constance Winks. Not long before their scheduled nuptials, at a ball thrown by the Royal Association of Engineers and Architects, Clive had chanced upon his fiancée in a compromising position with the elder Brunel, in a niche partially occupied by a bust of Archimedes. The offended man—doubly incensed by the joint desecration of both his bride-to-be and the ancient philosopher—had immediately issued a challenge to duel. Brunel had accepted.

However, in the interval between the challenge and the event, the two men had chanced to discover the mutuality of their interests. At first frostily, then more warmly, the men began to discourse on their shared vision of a world united by railroads and steamships, a world shrunken and neatly packaged by the magnificent inventions of their age. Soon, the duel was called off. Clive and Constance were married as planned. Marc Brunel became both Cowperthwait's business partner and frequent house guest, bringing his own wife and young son along. Upon Cosmo's birth, he and little Isambard Kingdom ("I. K.," or "Ikky") had been raised practically as brothers.

Now the young Cowperthwait turned to his companion and said, "Well, Ikky, what do you think? She's keeping up a full head of steam, with only a few ounces of fuel. Is it a miracle, or is it not? Stephenson's Rocket was nothing compared to this."

Ever practical, Ikky answered, "If this works, you're going to put an end to the entire coal-mining industry. I'd watch my back, lest it receive some disgruntled miner's dirty pickaxe. Or, what's even more likely, the silver table-knife of a mine owner."

Cosmo grew reflective. "I hadn't thought of that as-

pect of my discovery. Still, one can't retard progress. If I hadn't chanced upon the refinement of Klaproth's new metal, someone else surely would have."

In 1789, Martin Heinrich Klaproth had discovered a new element he named "uranium," after the recently discovered celestial body Uranus. Other scientists, among them Eugene-Melchior Peligot, had set out to refine the pure substance. Cosmo Cowperthwait, inheritor of his father's skills, raised in an atmosphere of practical invention, had succeeded first, by reduction of uranium tetrachloride with potassium.

Casting about for new uses for this exciting element, Cosmo had hit upon harnessing its heat-generating properties to replace the conventional means of steam production on one of his father's engines. Clive Cowperthwait had reluctantly acceded, and today saw the trial run of that modified engine.

"Come," said Cosmo, "let me instruct the engineer one last time."

The two youths clambered aboard the train. In the cab the crew welcomed them rather coldly. The chief engineer, an old fellow with walrus mustaches, nodded ceaselessly as Cosmo talked, but the young inventor felt he really was not paying attention.

"Now, remember, there is no stoking of this engine, or addition of fuel. Depressing this lever brings the two portions of uranium closer together, producing more heat, while pulling it out increases the distance and diminishes the heat. You'll note that this pin and cowl arrangement prevents the depression of the lever beyond the danger zone—"

Cosmo interrupted himself in alarm. "The cowl— it's split and ready to fall off. It seems a deliberate breach of all my safety precautions. Who's responsible for this malfeasance?"

The crew looked idly at the ceiling of the cab. One insolent superfluous stoker whistled an air Cosmo recognized as an indecent folk tune by the title "Cham-pagne Charlie."

Cosmo realized it would be futile to attempt to assign guilt now. "Come with me, Ikky. We must fix this before the trial." The two descended the engine.

Some distance away on the grandstand, Clive Cowperthwait had just kissed his wife and moved to the front of the podium to give his speech.

"I am sorry that my partner could not be here today," he began, "but I'm sure I can speak long enough for both of us. . . ." There was mild laughter from the crowd.

Cosmo was in no mood to join in the gaiety of the spectators. "Where can I find some tools?" he demanded frantically of Ikky.

"How about the blacksmith's, back in town?"

"Good thinking. Let me tell Father to delay the start of the engine."

"Oh, let's just dash. You know how long your father speaks. We'll have plenty of time."

Cosmo and Ikky hurried toward the village.

While inside the blacksmith's they faintly heard the resumption of the music, which had ceased for Clive's speech. Cosmo and Ikky rushed outside in alarm.

At that instant an enormous explosion knocked them off their feet, shattering every window in the village. A hot wind rolled them along the ground. When they managed to regain their feet, they saw the remnants of a mushroom-shaped cloud towering high up into the sky.

With immense consternation, mixed with not a little trepidation, the pair of friends hastened back toward the site of the dedication.

Still many furlongs away, they encountered the rim of an immense smoking crater that sloped away into a glassy plain, the start of an excavation aimed at Asia.

Cosmo yelled into the desolate smoky waste. "Father! Mother!"

Ikky laid a hand on his arm. "It's plainly no use, Coz. There can't be anyone left alive there. They've all been blown to Jehovah by your invention. I read this as a mark of Providence, which even your father's usual loquacity could not forestall, signalling that the world is not ready for such knowledge, if it ever will be. . . . You may console yourself with the thought that it must have been a painless death, thank God. In any case, I venture to say we won't find enough mortal flinders to fill an umbrella stand."

Cosmo was in a state of shock, and could not reply. (Later, his old friendship with Ikky would be forever somewhat strained, as he recalled Ikky's callousness in the light of such a disaster, for which, by any fair measure, he was partly culpable.)

Feeling for some reason that it would be unwise to linger at the scene of the disaster, Ikky dragged his friend away.

Back in London, after a period of a few days' insensibility, Cosmo, now sole heir to the Cowperthwait name, had gradually recovered his mental faculties. One of the first things he had noticed had been the appearance of strange sores on his body. Ikky turned out to be suffering from the same manifestation of their experience, as were the few surviving Letchworthians. With the help of a pharmacist, Cowperthwait had derived a Naturopathic remedy, which, kept continuously against the skin, seemed to stem the plague. (Four years later, the sores would be all but vanished, yet Cowperthwait continued to wear his Naturopathic garment, more out of extreme caution than for any scientific reason.)

After attending to his own ills, Cowperthwait realized he must set about arranging a ceremonial funeral for his parents. He was ready to step forth from his home one day to visit a local undertaker. Opening his front door, he was shocked to encounter someone already standing there.

The fellow was on the shortish side of average height, wiry and eager-eyed, dressed in loose American style. He hailed Cowperthwait vigorously.

"Friend, I been observin' of you in your bereavement, as you wander stupefied and pole-axed about this here town, and I come to the conclusion that you are in need of some moral companionship and support. In short, a personal val-l-et."

Cowperthwait knew not what to make of this character. "Are you from the undertaker's?"

"Better'n that, young fellow. I'm from the Yew-nited States of Goddam America, and I can get anything done that you order."

In his confused and guilty condition, Cowperthwait latched on to this offer eagerly. "What—what's your name?"

"Nails McGroaty, if it please you, Chief. Hell, even if it don't. So called since I am tougher than my namesake, and twice as sharp. Now you just put your affairs in my hands, and let your mind be at peace. We'll show this town a wake, funeral and reception the likes of which they ain't witnessed since ol' Henry the Eighth threw snake-eyes."

Cowperthwait made up his mind. McGroaty was hired on the spot.

True to his word, the brash American arranged a first-class cortege to honor Clive and Constance Cowperthwait. There was enough black crepe to cover Westminster Cathedral.

After this performance, Cowperthwait grew assured that McGroaty was indeed no confidence trickster but apparently just a man in need of a permanent position with a lenient employer. Cowperthwait, apparently, had fit the bill.

McGroaty carried out his new household duties with dispatch. So invaluable, in fact, had he acquitted himself on a hundred occasions since, that sometimes Cowperthwait felt him more an older, more worldly brother than a servant.

The man's selling points were not his personal appearance, nor his insouciant demeanor. McGroaty was flippant, wry and occasionally abusive—hardly the marks of a good servant. He affected a casual dress reminiscent of a frontiersman, a kind of roughneck dandyism. McGroaty neglected shaving, and had never been known to bathe—a failing somewhat mitigated by his liberal use of strong toilet-waters.

McGroaty was, as he liked to remind Cowperthwait at frequent intervals, "one hunderd and ten per cent American." His colorful history made his master wonder how one nation, even large as it was, could hold millions of such individuals, granted the representative nature of McGroaty's past.

McGroaty claimed to have been with the Stephen Austin expedition into the territory of Texas. ("G. T. T.," or "Gone To Texas," was currently American slang for fleeing the law, and Cowperthwait wondered if such had been McGroaty's motives.) The man also maintained that he had been initiated into the Chickasaw tribe as a warrior, after saving the life of Chief Ikkemotubbe, and had willingly fought against his fellow whites who had sought to remove the tribe from their desirable lands in Mississippi. (A permanent weal on his buttocks, eagerly displayed to any chance female acquaintance, however reluctant she might be to view McGroaty's bare arse cheeks, was alleged to represent tribal sacrifice.) He bragged that he had been a mooncusser in New England, and would slyly exhibit, upon much cajoling, a small flat ingot of gold known as a "smuggler's bar," which fit neatly into his vest pocket.

Cowperthwait never learned what had made him seek permanent refuge in England, but suspected it was an illicit affair of titanic proportions.

All in all, McGroaty was a man of remarkable dimensions—the shortest of which was culture—and a companion Cowperthwait felt helped to offset his tendency toward dreaming abstraction.

Under McGroaty's stewardship, the years passed rather amiably. Ikky and his father operated the joint Cowperthwait-Brunel enterprises alone, insuring Cowperthwait, as absentee proprietor, of a guaranteed income and allowing him to indulge in his scientific investigations. Needless to say, he had lost all interest in further uranium-based transportation.

He had thought himself safe in turning his attentions to biological matters. What harm could come, after all, of experiments with tiny amphibians?

But woman-sized ones—Cowperthwait was beginning to suspect they were another matter altogether.

3. The Man With The Silver Nose

In the days following the establishment of the false Victoria on the throne, as May shaded into June, Cowperthwait found himself disbelieving at times that he had ever experienced such a queer witching-hour visit from the Prime Minister, or that the product of his laboratory now sat in the regal seat reserved for the Hanoverian line. It seemed too much like a dream or nightmare born of a visit to one of the opium dens of Tiger Bay or Blue Gate Fields in the Old Port section of the city.

Yet such periods of doubt were dispelled by certain stern and irrefutable facts. The salamandrine Victoria was no longer at de Mallet's. The white velvet cushions in the landau were permanently stained. Dispatches detailing the unfolding of events arrived daily from Melbourne, hand-delivered in laminated and inlaid cases which normally contained official state documents. The functionaries who passed on these missives were members of the Queen's Messengers, those agents entrusted with the most privy of communications.

June 1

Still no trace of the veridical V. I have employed certain confidential agents with the story that they are searching for my illegitimate daughter. Naturally, their first step will be to comb all the most obvious hide-places, including brothels like de Mallet's. Should they ultimately fail, I might have to bring in the Yard.

In the evenings, with pseudo-V. locked in her room, I search the teeming city myself, so far all to no avail.

Hopefully,
W. L.

June 3

Have kept contacts between V. and her ministers to a minimum. Let it be known that the Queen's "neuralgia" prevents her taking much interest in mat-

ters of state. All ceremonial duties are indefinitely postponed. Don't believe anyone suspects the imposture yet, tho' V. did eat an insect in public. I talked coolly right over the general consternation. The Ladies of the Chamber are hardest to put off. Many are the spies of Conroy and others. Have told them the Queen is experiencing an unusually difficult and prolonged menstrual period, and has armed herself with a pistol and threatened to shoot anyone who sees her naked, water-bloated form. The Ladies seemed one and all to comprehend. Yet how long can I believably prolong this . . . ?

Frantically,
W. L.

June 5

Still no ray of light. Much of the time I might spend searching is taken up with satisfying V.'s predatory sexuality in order to keep her tractable. Her capacity is awesome. Find myself drained. Losing hope.

Despairingly,
W. L.

Cowperthwait read these missives with growing concern. All his experiments were pushed aside and forgotten. Even the eight-legged calves from Letchworth failed to sustain his attention. His mind was preoccupied with Melbourne's dilemma. The nation's dilemma, though the general populace was all unwitting. What would happen if the real Victoria were not found by the day of her coronation? Would a newt be solemnly consecrated by the Archbishop of Canterbury as the Queen of England? It would be worse for England than the papacy of Pope Joan had been for the Romish Church.

And what of the awful travails the real Victoria must be undergoing? Here was a girl who had never in her short life even been allowed to ascend a staircase by herself, for fear she might stumble and fall. Now she was adrift in the urban squalor that was London. Cowperthwait could not rid his mind of a series of images of degradation and humiliation that were both disturbing and strangely exciting.

In the end the hallucinations threatened to rob him of his sleep, and he realized that he had to do something to rid himself of this excess of nervous humours. Science had temporarily lost its allure. There was nothing for it but to join the search for Victoria himself. Any other option would leave him feeling he hadn't done enough.

It would not do to tell Melbourne, however. The Prime Minister seemed somewhat reluctant to further involve Cowperthwait, and the young inventor, as a loyal subject, was not willing to risk being told definitely not to contribute his help.

Thus it was that the ninefold chiming of the tall timepiece in the hall one foggy evening found Cowperthwait, cape athwart his shoulders, standing indecisively at the door to his Mayfair residence.

Where should he begin to look? Where would a young girl on the run likely end up, in this metropolis of

sin and greed? Other than a brothel—and Melbourne had already had them all searched—Cowperthwait realized he hadn't the slightest idea.

Cowperthwait felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to confront Nails McGroaty. His manservant was dressed for the night chill with a stained bandana knotted around his otherwise bare throat, and obviously intended to accompany Cowperthwait.

In confirmation McGroaty said, "Don't worry, Coz, it's all jake. I ain't lettin' you go out alone. I knows the whole dismal story, knowed it since that first night when I was a-listenin' at the study door. And though it don't matter nuthin' to me—your precious royalty bein' jest a bunch of whangdoodles to a born demmycratic American—I can't stand by and let you expose yourself to all kinds of danger. You need a ripsnortin' bobcat sech as myself by your side, when push comes to shove.

"As I says to Mike Fink when we was workin' on the same barge up and down the Big Muddy, 'Mike, there ain't nuthin' more important in life than friendship.' That was jest before I walloped the tar out of the mean bastard and tossed him overboard."

Cowperthwait felt vastly relieved, and showed it by warmly clasping McGroaty's hand. "Your noble offer is accepted, Nails. Let's go."

As they were leaving, Cowperthwait's eye fell on a malacca cane protruding from the elephant's-foot umbrella stand by the door, and he snatched it up.

"Just in case," he told McGroaty with a wink.

"Air you sure, Guv? You remember the last time—"

"I've fixed it since then."

"Suit yerself."

As they left behind the exclusive district where Cowperthwait maintained his household, the streets became more and more thronged with citizens of every stripe. Blind beggars, elegant ladies, coarse streetwalkers known as "motts," hurdy-gurdy operators, men with dancing bears, a fellow running a movable shooting-gallery where participants banged away with spring-loaded pellet guns at targets moved like Cowperthwait's writing pallet by a crank. . . . A fight broke out between two match-girls, and one knocked the other into a horse-trough. This was the least remarkable incident Cowperthwait and McGroaty witnessed.

When they reached Oxford Circus, McGroaty indicated that they were to cross the thoroughfare. Cowperthwait hesitated.

The actual streets of London were in many cases running sewers and rubbish bins. Offal and manure presented an obstacle ankle-deep. Springing up to capitalize on this phenomenon were the crossing-sweeps, homeless boys and girls who, for a token payment, would brush a path across the street for a citizen. Seeing his master's hesitation to imbue his footwear in the muck, McGroaty now moved to engage such a one.

"You there, ol' carrot-top! C'mon and clear us a path!"

The shoeless youth thus addressed hurried over. His clothes were in rags and he was missing several teeth, yet he flashed a broad smile and radiated a kind of in-

nocent happiness. His one possession appeared to be a broom worn almost to its nubbin.

Doffing his cap, he said, "Tiptoft's the name, gents. Reasonable rates and swift service is me motto. Anytime you're in the neighborhood, ask for me."

Without further ado, the boy stepped squarely into the horrid slop with his bare feet and began to sweep obediently. Cowperthwait and McGroaty followed in his wake.

On the far side of the street Cowperthwait asked, "How much?"

"One pence apiece, if it's agreeable, gents."

Cowperthwait handed the lad a shilling.

The sweep was ecstatic at the overpayment. "Thank'ee, guv'nor, thank'ee! Won't I eat elegant tonight!"

Cowperthwait and McGroaty moved on. The inventor seemed touched by the incident, and at last chose to comment.

"Here you see an example of the trickle-down theory of material improvement, Nails. Thanks to the fruits of the Cowperthwait-Brunel enterprises, I am enabled to endow those less fortunate. A rising tide lifts all ships."

"I done heard that trickle-down stuff compared to a sparrow what gets whatever oats a horse shits out undigested."

"A crude and imprecise analogy, Nails. In any case, someday, thanks to science, the streets of London will be clean of organic wastes, and such poor urchins, if they exist at all, will be maintained by a wealthy and benevolent state."

"Ayup," was McGroaty's laconic comment.

Continuing their walk in silence for half an hour through the clammy streets—Victoria the Imposter would have no need of her atomizer in this weather—Cowperthwait finally thought to ask where they might be heading.

"Well," said McGroaty, "I figger if Horseapple is always needing people for the treadmills. Perhaps your little lady was press-ganged there."

Cowperthwait nodded sagely, although he was truly no further enlightened.

Through the cobbled dismal streets, past shabby forms slumped against splintered doors in shadowed entryways, ignoring the outstretched hands and more lascivious solicitations of the ragged throng, Cowperthwait followed behind McGroaty. They seemed to be trending toward the Thames. Soon, Cowperthwait could contain himself no longer.

"Exactly where are we heading, Nails?"

"Horseapple's pumping station."

Soon the air was overlaid with the murky odors of the river that flowed through the city like a liquid dump. Water sloshed over nearby unseen weed-wrapped steps. Cowperthwait heard the muffled dip of oars, presumably from one of the aquatic scavengers who made their meager living by fishing from the river whatever obscure refuse they might encounter—not excluding human corpses.

A building loomed up out of the fetid air. Light leaked out around and through its shutters. A vague

rumbling as of vast machinery at work emanated from the structure. McGroaty knocked in a mysterious fashion. While they waited for a response, the servant explained to Cowperthwait the nature of the enterprise run by his friend.

"Horseapple heard they was lookin' for someone to supply water to them new houses out in Belgravia. He greased a few palms with the old spondoolicks, and got the contract. He's been addin' customers right steady ever since. 'Course, every new client means more manpower's needed."

Cowperthwait was astonished. "They're drinking Thames water in Belgravia? Why, this stuff is positively pestilential."

"Oh, it ain't so bad as all that. Since they put the grates up on the intake pipes, nuthin' bigger'n a rat can get through."

The door opened, and a belligerent poxed and bearded face thrust out. Squinting, the man recognized McGroaty.

"Come in, come in, Nails. Another volunteer for the treadmills, I take it. Does he need further persuasion?" Horseapple flourished a truncheon.

"Not this one, old man. It's my mate, Cosmo. He's lookin' for a lady friend of his, and thought she might be gracin' your establishment."

"Let him look, then. But don't disturb their rhythm. It makes for bad water pressure and the toffs complain."

Horseapple conducted the visitors through some cobwebbed antechambers and into a dimly lit cavernous interior. The building must have been at one time a brewery or warehouse. Now, however, ranked across the quarter-acre or so of floor space were five dozen wooden treadmills, all hooked by an elaborate system of gears, cams and shafts to a brace of huge pumps. The treadmills were manned by rag-clad wraiths chained to their stations. Whip-bearing overseers marched up and down, applying persuasion whenever a unit flagged.

Cowperthwait turned angrily to Horseapple. "My Christ, man, this is absolutely barbaric! A steam engine or two would easily outperform all these poor wretches."

Horseapple stroked his hirsute chin. "You're talking heavy capital investment now, Carmine. The bleedin' pumps cost me enough as it was. And besides, what would these poor buggers do with their free time? Just drink themselves silly and lie in the gutter. As it stands, they've got a roof over their head and three meals a day, albeit it's usually only whatever's fouling up the grates."

McGroaty laid a hand on Cowperthwait's shoulder. "No time for social reform now, Coz. We got an important lady to find."

So saying, the pair trooped up and down the ranks, looking for the missing Queen. For purposes of comparison, Cowperthwait carried a silhouette that had been published in the daily papers.

No luck. Horseapple invited them to check the sleeping off-shift laborers, which they quickly did, making all haste to escape the urinous and bedbug-ridden common dormitory.

Horseapple saw them to the door. "Remember, Nails—ten shillings a head. The way this city is growing, I'll be forced to double my operations in a year."

The door slammed behind them, and Cowperthwait stood motionless a moment, stunned and disheartened by the experience. With such pits and cesspools of inhumanity, how could he ever hope to imagine the Queen was still alive and unhurt, and able to be found? The task seemed hopeless. . . .

McGroaty was whispering in Cowperthwait's ear. "Don't let on, but there's someone watchin' us. To your left, behind that pile of crates."

Cowperthwait slowly turned his head. A glint of light flashed off something silver.

"I'll handle this," Cowperthwait whispered back. He raised his cane. Then, in a loud voice: "Step forward and declare yourself, man!"

From the shadows emerged the form of a giant. A swarthy native of India, he appeared at least seven feet tall, although some of that height might have been attributable to his voluminous headwrap. Dressed in colorful silks, he bore a long scimitar by his side. "Holy Andy Jackson!"

"Have no fear," declaimed Cowperthwait, his voice quavering. The inventor raised his cane and pressed a spring catch in its handle. The lower portion of the cane shot off, taking the concealed sword-blade with it and leaving Cowperthwait holding a stubby handle.

The two waited for the Indian to advance and decapitate them both with one mighty blow.

Instead, the thuggee was joined by another figure. The Man with The Silver Nose.
Lord Chuting-Payne.

In his late fifties, Chuting-Payne possessed the athletic build of an Olympian. Impeccably attired, the master of vast ancestral estates at Carking Fardels, he had once been deemed the most handsome man of his generation. That had been before the duel he had fought with Baron Leopold von Schindler of Austria.

One evening in the year 1798, the eighteen-year-old Chuting-Payne, only scion of his line, had been hosting a dinner for various ambassadors, in an attempt to further his political ambitions. Present had been his sovereign, the demented King George the Third. The Austrian baron, somewhat tipsy and of a fractious nature, had criticized with Teutonic wit Chuting-Payne's wine list in front of the royal guest of honor. Humiliated beyond tolerance, Chuting-Payne had immediately challenged von Schindler to pistols at twenty paces.

Von Schindler, revealing himself as a coward and catfist, had fired while Chuting-Payne was still turning, blowing off the man's nose.

Immense quantities of blood streaming down his face, Chuting-Payne had then calmly drilled von Schindler through the heart.

The jewelry firm of Rundell, Bridge & Rundell—the very makers of the new lightweight crown that was to be used in frail Victoria's upcoming coronation—had been employed to melt down some family sterling and fashion a prosthetic silver nose to replace Chuting-

Payne's missing flesh one. They had exerted all their skill, and the resulting simulacrum was a marvel to behold. Affixed by gutta-percha adhesive, the nose was said to be capable of exciting the most jaded of women.

But the attainment of a new nose was hardly the end of the affair. Pressed by the Austrians, King George had sworn out a warrant for Chuting-Payne's arrest. The man had been forced to flee the country. As the tale went, he had ended up in India, in the Province of Mysore, still an independent nation at the time. Turning his back on his own country, Chuting-Payne had allied himself with the Maharaja of Mysore, Tippoo Sahib, and his French backers against the British. He had lived in Mysore for a year, until it fell to a joint attack by British and Mahratta troops.

Escaping from the siege of Seringapatam, Chuting-Payne had then traveled among the other independent Indian nations—Sind, Rajputana, Punjab—until the death of George the Third in 1820. Somehow he had amassed a large enough fortune to bribe King George the Fourth to rescind the long-standing warrant against him. He had returned to his native land over a decade ago, a figure of enigmatic Oriental qualities, sun-browned and distant, more wog than limey.

Having been mistreated by Victoria's ancestor, Chuting-Payne had conceived a stupendous hatred of their whole line. As Melbourne had intimated to Cowperthwait, the man would like nothing better than to involve the throne in any sort of scandal.

"Mister Cowperthwait, I believe," said the silver-nasaled nobleman, his voice imbued with queer resonances. "I don't think we've ever had the pleasure of meeting. My name I assume you know. Allow me to introduce my servant, Gunputty."

Gunputty bowed. Cowperthwait croaked out something. The bizarre pair completely unnerved him.

"What brings you so far from your retorts and alembics, Mister Cowperthwait? Looking for more amphibious subjects among the slime? By the way, where is your creation lately? I've noticed her absence from de Mallet's."

"She's—I've—that is—"

"No matter. She's not the only unique lady missing. Or so my spies report."

"I—I don't know what you mean. . . ."

"Oh, really? I think differently. In fact, I believe we are both abroad in search of the same thing, Mister Cowperthwait. Lest the *hot polloi* overhear, we'll just call her 'Vee' among ourselves, shall we?"

"You're—you're hallucinating."

"Far from it, Mister Cowperthwait. Although I must admit that your adappled clodpoll of a servant, who appears the byblow of a New World savage on a warthog, does resemble some of my less pleasant nightmares."

"Put up your dukes, Tinfole, them's fightin' words."

Chuting-Payne snugged his white gloves for a more precise fit. "Tell your man, Cowperthwait, that the last fellow who fought with me is now so much worm's meat, and that he would be well advised to steer clear of his betters. Gunputty—fetch the carriage. Mister Cow-



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perthwait, farewell for the nonce. I sense our paths will cross again."

In a moment Lord Chuting-Payne's phaeton was rumbling away. Cowperthwait felt his wits gradually returning, and was mortified that he had let Chuting-Payne treat himself and McGroaty in such a cavalier fashion.

Seeming similarly embarrassed, McGroaty said, "I thought you said you done fixed that cane."

"It acted precisely as I wished," extemporized Cowperthwait. "Had it struck that lascar, it would have knocked him senseless."

"I suggest more di-reck tactics in the future, Coz. That there Gunputty don't seem the type to be stymied by no flyin' baton."

"Suggestion acknowledged, Nails."

4. A Woman Called Otto

Cowperthwait spread mint jelly across his scone. The transparent greenish substance reminded him of the egg mass of the hellbender. He still recalled the shivery thrill he had felt upon receiving the crate from his American compatriot, S. J. Gould of Harvard, containing the glass vials packed with fresh hellbender eggs, nestled snugly in wooden cradles set in sawdust and straw for their transatlantic journey. The many nights of feverish experimentation, the innumerable abortions and teratological nightmares which had to be destroyed, the refinements in technique and purification, all resulting in the unique miracle that was Victoria. . . . A wave of sadness and nostalgia crossed over him. Would he ever see his progeny again, or would she remain forever immured inside Buckingham Palace, a slave to the needs of the state?

The only solution lay in finding the real Victoria, a creature no less fabulous than her salamandrine counterpart. Where, oh where could she be? In the three days since their visit to Horseapple's, Cowperthwait had racked his brain for any likely burrow she might have found, all to no avail. Even at this moment, Cowperthwait had McGroaty out scouring the city for any possible clue, however wild and far-fetched.

A knock resounded on his study door. Cowperthwait tugged down his Naturopathic corset beneath his dressing gown, adjusted the silk scarf around his neck, and called out, "Yes, who is it?"

The door swung open and McGroaty entered, propelling a scurvy creature before him. The fellow clutched a battered cap with both hands in front of him, high up on his chest. This position for his headgear was necessitated by his having a withered right arm only a few inches in length. In compensation, his whole left arm was an overdeveloped bulk of muscle.

"Coz, this here's Shortarm. He runs a sewing shop down in the Seven Dials. Shorty, tell the guv'nor what you told me."

Shortarm attempted to compose his features into a semblance of innocence, but succeeded only in looking like a fox with chicken feathers stuck to its lips. "Wurl, it's like this, see. I got me a daughter, a lurvely gell—"

"He fathered the poor thing on his older daughter, so you might say she's his granddaughter too," interrupted McGroaty.

Cowperthwait winced. "Yes, go on."

"Wurl, she's all of six, so's I figgered she was old enough to start earning her keep. Otherwise, she was gonna find herself eatin' air pie, if you get my meanin'. So I puts her to work in the shop, stitchin' up breeches—"

This time it was Cowperthwait who interrupted. "You know, of course, that in so doing you were in direct violation of Lord Althorp's Factory Act, regarding the employment of minors."

Shortarm wrinkled his brow in genuine bafflement. "Can't say as how I ever heard of no Fackery Axe, sir. And she warn't doin' no minin' of any sort."

Cowperthwait sighed. "Pray, continue."

"Wurl. One evenin' aroun' seven, just as the gells was finishin' their day by receivin' their nightly strappado, in busts these two wimmen. One's an older lady with the pinchy face of a do-gooder, so's I know I'm in for trouble right away. The other 'peared to be much younger, but I couldn't be sure, for she had a veil 'crost her face. And not no lacey thing either, but a piece o' muslin with eye-holes in it."

"Next thing I knows, the older bitch—pam me, sir, lady—had me good arm what was holdin' the whip doubled up behind me back, fit to snap. Gord, she was a strong un!"

"Sisters," she says, 'I'm a-here to offer any of you what wants it sanctuary at my school. Which of you will come with me?' Next thing I knows, all my gells is hol-lerin' and shoutin', 'Me, me, I'll go, take me!' Even me own two daughters joined in the tragic chorus."

Shortarm paused to sniffle and wipe a tear away. "I can tell you, guv'nor, it hurt me deep inside. To think of all the attention and money and high-quality wittles I done lavished on those gells, and then to have 'em turn on me like that. It cut me to the quick."

"Nails, I fail to see what any of this has to do with—"

"Hold on, Coz, it's comin'." McGroaty prodded Shortarm, who resumed his tale.

"The elder gell turns to the one in the veil then and says, 'Vicky, escort the wimmen to the carriages.' When my shop is empty, she boots me headfirst against the wall. I didn't wake up for half an hour, and there was no way of tracin' 'em by then."

A thrill had shot along Cowperthwait's nerves at the name of the assistant rescuer. Trying not to betray his eagerness, he fumbled in his purse to reward the sweatshop owner, coming up with a five-pound note.

"Gord, a five! Thank'ee kindly, sir. This'll be more'n enough to replenish my workforce, so to speak." Shortarm turned to leave, then halted. "Oh, if you find my gells, you're a-welcome to the older one. She's kinder used up. But as for the younger . . ." Shortarm smacked his lips obscenely.

Cowperthwait shot to his feet. "Nails, eject this brute before I give him a good thrashing!"

McGroaty picked up Shortarm by his trousers and shirt. "Them's the words I been waitin' to hear, Coz!"

When McGroaty returned from tossing Shortarm out, Cowperthwait was pacing his study, rubbing his hands together. He stopped and grabbed McGroaty by the arm.

"Nails, it all makes sense! The Queen, frustrated by the glacial pace of her government and her remoteness from her subjects, has joined forces with a private benefactress, and now seeks to remedy the ills of her empire firsthand! It's a noble attempt and speaks well of her character, but we must find her and persuade her that she can do more good from her throne."

McGroaty rubbed his whiskery chin thoughtfully. "Ackshully, Coz, it shouldn't be too hard. I can't imagine any sech school as can house dozens of gals can remain much of a secret from its neighbors."

"Precisely, Nails. Let us begin our enquiries."

By that very afternoon McGroaty's inspired ferreting had met with success. Cowperthwait clutched in his clammy hand a pasteboard bearing a name and address in nearby Kensington:

LADY OTTOLINE CORNWALL'S
LYCEUM AND GYNOCRATIC MISSION
NUMBER TWELVE NOTTING HILL GATE
EDUCATION, LIBERATION, VINDICATION
"SORORAE SE FACIUNT ID"—SAPPHO

Cowperthwait hurriedly snatched up a large maple cane from the stand by the door. "Come, Nails, let us be off while it is still light out."

McGroaty eyed the cane dubiously. "Is that a plain walkin' stick, or some new infemal device, Coz?"

Cowperthwait chuckled. "The latter, I fear, Nails. Observe." Cowperthwait opened a breach in the cane, revealing a large-caliber shell. "The trigger is here in the grip. I wager even a superhuman specimen like Gunputty will not be able to easily fend off a charge of this size."

"With any luck, we won't run into that towel-headed furriner at all today. Meanwhile, don't go a-pointin' that cane at no helpless merchant who wants a few pence extra fer his termaters, like you usually do."

The pair exited the Cowperthwait manse. There, on the sidewalk, they encountered a familiar face: the gap-smiled countenance of little Tiptoft, the crossing-sweep.

"Hullo, kind sir. I seen your man scurryin' about the town and took the liberty of followin' him back here. This seems like a ritzy neighborhood with a lack of sweepery competition. I shall reside here henceforth."

"God's wounds! You—you can't encamp outside my house like this. This is Mayfair, after all, not Covent Garden. What will the neighbors say?"

"Doubtless they will be forever in your debt, sir, for securing such an asset to clean-footed traffic."

To illustrate his utility, Tiptoft dashed out into the street and began switching away at a huge pile of accumulated manure, sending showers of offal left and right, bespattering passersby who paused to flourish their fists and utter imprecations.

"Stop, stop, that's enough! Look now, will you take this money and go away?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I've got me mind fixed on a steady income."

"All right, all right. Let's see—do you have any objections to living in my mews, with the horses?"

"Horses is me bread and butter, so to speak, sir. I do not."

"Very well. You may live in the mews and receive meals and a weekly stipend, provided you ply your trade elsewhere."

"Agreed, sir! And furthermore, it is to be understood that your honor will have unqualified first call on me services."

The two shook hands on the deal. Then Cowperthwait said, "I cannot spend any more time here dallying. We are in search of a woman."

"I could help there, too, sir."

"No, no, that's fine. Goodbye for now, Tiptoft."

"Allow me to conduct you partway, sir."

With Tiptoft sweeping ahead like a dervish, Cowperthwait and McGroaty proceeded toward Kensington, eventually parting ways with their escort near Hyde Park, where the confluence of traffic provided a fertile field for his broom.

Number Twelve Notting Hill Gate was a large edifice in the early Georgian mode, with freshly washed steps and starched curtains in the windows serving to conceal the interior. Using the knocker, which was shaped to resemble the ancient symbol of the labrys, or double-headed axe, Cowperthwait sought admittance. The door was soon opened partway by an elderly maid, stopping at the short extent of a stout chain.

"No visiting privileges for menfolk," she said, and slammed the door.

Cowperthwait was both baffled and slightly enraged. "I say—" He resumed knocking. The door opened once more, this time to reveal the snout of a large old-fashioned pistol aimed at his head.

A stern and cultivated female voice spoke. "Perhaps you failed to comprehend my maid's injunction. We do not permit husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles, employers or lovers entrance. When we admitted your wife, daughter, sister, niece, employee or paramour, it was under tragic circumstances which your presence would only aggravate and reinforce. Now, will you depart, or shall I blow your head off?"

Cowperthwait's ire won out over any fear. "Madam, I do not know any of the young ladies in your care, unless possibly it be the one whom I seek. My name is Cosmo Cowperthwait, and I merely wish to speak to you about, um, the missing wife of a friend."

The pistol dropped away. "Your name is . . . did you say Cowperthwait?"

"Yes, that was the appellation."

"Author of the monograph 'Sexual Dimorphism Among The Echinoderms, Focussing Particularly Upon The *Asteroidae* and *Holothurioidae*'?"

"The same."

"One moment."

The door shut, the chain rattled off, and the door swung wide.

Revealed was an imposing figure of womanhood. Clad in a strange kind of one-piece white cotton garment that ended at the elbows and knees, the woman stood six feet tall with a deep bosom and large hands and feet. Striped lisle stockings and flat athletic shoes completed her outfit. Her hair was sequestered under a plain mob-cap. Her grey eyes radiated a fierce intelligence. Her full unpainted lips were quirked in a smile, as she dangled the pistol by her side.

"You and your servant may enter, Mister Cowperthwait. But just remember that you are here solely on my whim, and may be ejected—or worse—at any moment, if your misbehavior merits it."

Cowperthwait was somewhat embarrassed at this odd woman's revealing attire, but sought to meet her on her own unconventional terms. "Madam, I assure you that you are dealing with two gentlemen of the highest propriety and social standing."

"When one contemplates the deeds that are daily done in society's name, such a description is no high recommendation. But please enter."

Once inside, Cowperthwait said, "I assume I have the honor of addressing the proprietor of this establishment?"

"Indeed, I am Lady Ottoline Cornwall, and this is my school. Perhaps you would care to see its functioning?"

"Certainly. I have already been intrigued by what I have heard of your recruitment methods."

"Desperate times demand desperate measures, Mister Cowperthwait. I am not one of those who believe that idle bemoaning or passivity will accomplish anything. When I see an evil, I move vigorously to remedy it. There is much wrong with this world, but I limit my scope to ameliorating the sorry condition of woman-kind. I have pledged my family fortune to this establishment, which is dedicated to helping unfortunate girls from every stratum of society. From the warrens of Lambeth to the drawing-rooms of my own posh precinct I extract the abused and maltreated and try to inculcate a sense of their own worth in them."

Lady Cornwall had brought them to a closed door, upon which she now gently knocked, then opened. Cowperthwait saw inside rows of desks at which sat a class of girls of various ages, all dressed identically with their headmistress. At the front of the room stood a teacher. Cowperthwait eagerly scanned her face for a resemblance to the missing Queen, but was disappointed.

"Here you see some of the girls at their lessons. Latin, Greek, French, geography, and many more subjects are here covered, particularly the natural sciences. We use several of your monographs in this latter area, Mister Cowperthwait."

Cowperthwait was flattered, and did not know where to look. "I—that surprises me, Lady Cornwall. My papers are not intended for the layman. Ah, laywoman."

"Our girls are up to it. Thank you, Miss Fairbairn, you may get back to your teaching."

Shutting the classroom door, Lady Cornwall continued the tour, bringing them to a capacious ballroom. The large space was fitted out with gymnastic equipment of all sorts: barbells, skipping-ropes, punching

bags. Bales of hay with targets on them even afforded the possibility for some of the girls to practice archery.

"I do not neglect the physical side of my charges, either. Eight hours of sleep nightly in our well-ventilated dormitory, plenty of good food and exercise, along with the wearing of sensible clothing—no stays or corseted footgear here—can work wonders for their self-image."

When McGroaty saw the bows and arrows, his face lit up. "Criminy! I ain't handled a bow nor arrow since leavin' the Chickasaws! Here, now, Missie, you're a-holdin' it all wrong. Let me lam you what Chief Ikkemotubbe showed me."

Soon McGroaty was surrounded by enthusiastic young Amazons. Tongue protruding from the corner of his mouth, he placed an arrow in the bull's-eye. Then he presented his hindquarters to the target and, bending over and firing between his legs, split the first shaft with a second.

Applause and huzzahs filled the air. Lady Cornwall said, "Your servant seems to have found something to occupy him. Shall we adjourn to my private office and discuss what brings you here?"

"By all means."

Seated in Lady Cornwall's sanctum, holding a glass of port sangaree, Cowperthwait regarded the formidable woman before speaking. She had impressed him mightily with the acuity of her intellect and the strength of her mettle. He knew he must choose his words with care, so as not to anger or insult her.

"Ah, Lady Cornwall—"

"Please, I disdain titles. Call me Otto. And I shall address you by your Christian name also."

"Yes, um, Otto, then. Otto, would it be safe to assume that you look with favor and hope upon the ascension of our new Queen to the throne, as an exemplar of competent womanhood?"

Lady Cornwall snorted. "After a year, she has yet to prove that she's more than a poppet to Viscount Melbourne. I yet have my hopes. But she'll have to do more than she's done so far to merit them."

Cowperthwait studied the depths of his sangaree. "Suppose I were to tell you that the Queen, in an assertion of her independence, has run away."

Lady Cornwall jumped to her feet. "I'd shout bravo!"

"Please, Otto, calm down. While the Queen's hypothetical desertion might appeal to your romantic side, if you stop to consider it practically it presents more cause for grief than rejoicing. If we don't want to see the Queen lose the throne, then she must be cajoled to return to it."

Dropping into her chair, Lady Cornwall favored Cowperthwait with a calculated look and said, "How does any of this relate to me and my school?"

Dropping all subtlety, Cowperthwait said, "I have reason to believe that you employ a veiled woman referred to as 'Vicky.' Might it be she of whom we speak?"

"What if I tell you no? Then I suppose you'll demand that I haul poor Vicky before you, so that you can satisfy yourself. Why should I subject poor Vicky to your male imperiousness?"

Cowperthwait had no ready answer to this. Lady Cornwall eyed him piercingly, then spoke. "Cosmo, I respect you as a man of science, a male whose intellect and self-control raises him above the brutish level of his fellows."

Such talk made Cowperthwait nervous. What would she think of him if she knew of the newish Victoria, and how he had satisfied his base lusts upon it?

"Therefore, I will allow you to speak to my Vicky, but only on one condition. That you accompany me this moment on a mission that will perhaps open your eyes to the real condition of women in this isle. What do you say?"

"Well, if it's the only way—"

"It is."

"I consent."

"Capital!" Lady Cornwall rose and took a dress off a peg and donned it unconcernedly. She changed her shoes, then pulled off her mob-cap, spilling out long auburn curls. Clapping a flat straw hat on her head and grabbing a reticule, she said, "Let's go."

"But my servant—"

"Are you afraid to venture unaccompanied someplace where I am not?"

"By no means!"

"Then we're off."

Leaving by a back door, Cowperthwait and Lady Cornwall made their way to an omnibus stand and were soon on their way across town.

"Exactly where are we heading?"

"To Bartholomew Close, in the Smithfield Market. The central exchange for stolen goods."

Cowperthwait fingered his cane nervously.

They disembarked at a dilapidated three-story building with gingerbread trim whose lower floor held a meat market. The sight of so much raw red meat and the smell of animal blood made Cowperthwait feel faint.

"We are looking for Liza, a flower girl. She normally stations herself here, although I do not see her now. I have been arguing for weeks with her parents, trying to enroll her in the school. I feel they are almost ready to consent."

"What are we to do now?"

Lady Cornwall cupped her chin. "We'll have to visit Liza's home."

Down several noisome alleys they treaded, arriving finally at a ramshackle tenement. Lady Cornwall went confidently in, Cowperthwait tentatively following.

Upstairs, in a darkened hall illuminated only by what light penetrated a small filthy cobwebbed window, the schoolmistress knocked on a door.

The door cracked open and a bearded, greasy face thrust itself out. "Which family?" said the man gruffly.

"The Boffyflows."

"That'll be one pence for crossing the Swindle establishment, one pence likewise for the Scropeses, and a third for the Snypes."

"Very well. We'll pay. Now let us in."

The man opened the door fully. They entered.

The tiny candlelit unpartitioned room held four fami-

lies and their miserable possessions. The high-status Swindle occupied the quarter closest to the exit, and hence had to pay no tolls. Next came the Scropeses, then the Snypes. Lowest in stature were the Boffyflows, who cowered—mother, father, infants and adolescents—in the farthest corner.

Dispensing the pence, the pair made their way to the Boffyflows.

Father Boffyflow was a lardy fellow sitting in a rickety chair and nursing a black eye. Lady Cornwall accosted him. "Where's Liza?"

"On her doss, sniffin' and sobbin'."

"Why wasn't she at work today?"

"Argh, she warn't makin' nuffin sellin' flowers, so I decided she had to go out as a cripple."

"Cripple . . . ?" Lady Cornwall hastened to the girl on her pallet and lifted up the slack form.

Liza's fresh wrist-stub was wrapped in bloody rags.

Lady Cornwall wailed. "Oh, that I should have tempered with these savages! Now must I live with this on my conscience for the remainder of my life!"

She made to leave, carrying the unconscious girl.

Boffyflow interposed himself, thrusting his stomach against the schoolmistress. "Ere now, where are you takin' my girl—"

Before Cowperthwait could interpose there was a gunblast, and Boffyflow fell back in his chair, shot in the gut.

Lady Cornwall's hand was in her reticule, which exhibited a smoking hole from the derringer within.

"Anyone else object?" she asked.

Mister Snype advanced cautiously. "No argyment from us, Ma'am, long as we get our pence on the way out."

"Cosmo, see to it."

With shaking hands, Cowperthwait paid the exit tolls.

The trip back to Number Twelve Notting Hill Gate passed for Cowperthwait as in a dream. Only when he was once more sitting in Lady Cornwall's office and soothing his nerves with a rum and shrub did reality begin to resume its wonted dimensions.

When Lady Cornwall returned from letting out the female physician who had tended to Liza's wounds, she said, "And now, Cosmo, I'll keep my end of the bargain. Here is the woman you wished to see."

Cowperthwait could hardly contain his excitement at the appearance of the veiled woman. At last, the real Victoria would be restored to the throne and his Victoria would be returned to him. . . .

The woman slowly lifted her muslin veil.

At first Cowperthwait could hardly believe that the face revealed to him belonged to a human, let alone a woman. A mass of keloid scars and twisted discolored flesh, it resembled that of some hobgoblin or creature out of Dante's *Inferno*.

"A combination of acid and flame, administered by her bawd. Even women may hurt women, you see."

Cowperthwait struggled for something to say commensurate with the horrible injustice of the situation. "I—my growth factor—perhaps it might repair some of the damage. I can't guarantee anything. But regular applications might help."

"Vicky would appreciate that. Wouldn't you, Vicky?"

The woman nodded mutely, shedding a tear from one ruined eye.

"Thank you, Vicky. That will be all."

When the girl had left, Lady Cornwall came up by Cowperthwait's side.

"Cosmo, you stood up admirably during that little contretemps at Smithfield Market. And your pity toward Vicky touches me. I would like to reward you, if I may."

So saying, Lady Cornwall grabbed Cowperthwait in a grip of iron, tilted him backward and kissed him in the Continental manner, thrusting her tongue deep into his mouth.

Cowperthwait's cane discharged thunderously into the floor.

5. The Fatal Dance

For several days after the visit to Lady Cornwall's Lyceum, Cowperthwait moped about like a lovesick school-boy. The surprising denouement to his visit, in which Lady Cornwall had revealed the passion which lurked beneath her competent exterior, remained vivid in his mind, obscuring all other matters. Even the notion of finding the missing Queen was cast into shadow.

Cowperthwait had for years dreamed of marriage to a perfect companion. The woman would have to be smart and amiable, literate and lusty, free-minded and foot-loose. Truth to tell, his creation of Victoria had been something of an experiment along crafting the perfect bride he could not find.

Now, in the person of Lady Cornwall, he was convinced he had found her. Smitten by her soul-kiss, he could think of nothing but joining their fortunes and estates together. A woman who could appreciate "Sexual Dimorphism Among The Echinoderms" was not to be found every day.

Seeking McGroaty's opinion of the woman, Cowperthwait was somewhat dismayed by the manservant's undisguised disdain of her.

"She puts me in mind of a sartin Widder Douglas I knew, back in Hannibal, Moe. Always a-tryin' to reform and change people, which in my book is about as pointless as tossin' a lasso at the horn o' the moon. Plus she's all-mighty bossy. You mark my words—if'n you two get hitched, she'll have you scrubbin' her knickers on washday faster'n spit dries on a griddle."

Cowperthwait would have liked to have McGroaty endorse Lady Cornwall, but if this was not to be the case, then McGroaty would simply have to lump it. After all, an opportunity like this came along only once in a lifetime. . . .

The lone difficulty in Cowperthwait's view lay in how best to broach his proposal. It would have to be handled just right. . . .

When scarred Vicky visited shortly thereafter, for her first treatment with growth factor, Cowperthwait entrusted her with a note for her mistress.

Dearest Otto,

Our adventure is etched in flames upon my cortex. If you could possibly see fit to entertain me again, I would like to consult with you upon making our alliance a permanent one, so that we may offer each other mutual aid and comfort.

Your earnest admirer,

Cosmo

The reply he received with Vicky's next visit was rather brusque.

Dear Sir:

I am not at present of a mind to agree to any such permanent and exclusive arrangement as, if I read you aright, you are tendering. Let us submerge our feelings for the nonce, and remain simply friends.

Otto

This cold water dashed on his marital hopes threw Cowperthwait into a blue funk. He spent the next few days homebound, reading and rereading a passage in Blore's *Exceptional Creatures* about the Giant Rat of Sumatra. Eventually, however, he realized that such behavior ill suited him. Thrusting aside all consideration of personal happiness, he plunged once more into his quest for his vanished sovereign.

Every waking hour was devoted to the increasingly futile search for the vanished Queen. Accompanied by McGroaty, the young natural philosopher combed the festering warren that was lower-class London, silhouette in hand, feverish, sleep-deprived brain alert for any trace of Victoria.

By daylight and gaslight, aboveground and below, amidst the noisy market crowds or alone in a rooming house with a work-worn suspect female, Cowperthwait pursued the mirage of Victoria.

From fish-redolent Billingsgate to the prison hulks at Gravesend, where convicts lay sickly in bilge-water; from Grey's Inn law offices where pitiful petitioners pled their cases to tubercular sanitariums where angels like one named Florence Nightingale escorted him from bed to bed; from filthy docksides to plush gambling parlor . . . Through every stratum of the underworld, in fact—guided by McGroaty, whose knowledge of such places seemed encyclopaedic—Cowperthwait journeyed, footsore and obsessed.

And everywhere he searched, it seemed, a nemesis would greet him.

Lord Chuting-Payne, the arrogant, evil-tempered enemy of the throne.

Either Chuting-Payne was there waiting for him; or had just departed; or arrived as Cowperthwait was leaving. No matter what hour it was, the cruel and sardonic nobleman, always accompanied by the silent and forbidding Gunputty, appeared fresh and dapper, as unruffled as a calm lake. At those times when he and Cowperthwait came face to face, they usually exchanged no more than a brittle *bon mot* or two. Sad to relate, Chuting-Payne could be counted on to triumph in such ex-

changes, his rapier wit honed by a lifetime among the cynical rich.

Cowperthwait came to loathe the sight of the arrogant Lord with his precious-metal nose that made him seem half machine. He soon regarded the man as his own evil doppelganger, and the only comfort he could find in Chuting-Payne's continued appearances was that it meant the Lord was having no more luck in his search for Victoria than Cowperthwait was.

Victoria. The name itself began to sound unreal to Cowperthwait. Who was this phantasm, this woman he had never met in the flesh? She lay at the heart of Cowperthwait's life, at the center of the Empire's power. On the one hand, although only on the throne a year, it could be generally sensed that, after a succession of old, doddering Kings, she was already the very life-breath of a fresh new era, the embodiment of the sprawling political organism that stretched its tentacles across the globe. On the other hand, she was only one woman among millions, no more important in the ultimate scheme of things than the fishwife or costermonger Cowperthwait had just interviewed, no more to be loved and admired than the stoic Vicky whom Cowperthwait continued to treat. (And with some measure of success. . . .)

And what of his own Victoria? Melbourne's dispatches had trailed off, and Cowperthwait had heard nothing of the hypertrodden hellbender in days. The last missive had not been reassuring.

June 10

I fear the "black dog" of Melancholia has me in its jaws. I and the kingdom are positively undone, unless V. makes her reappearance. Whilst hopelessly waiting, I contemplate the merits of your creature: if only all women could be so tractable . . . !

From Stygian depths,

W. L.

Something of the same despondency gripped Cowperthwait. He hoped that the Prime Minister in his funk was not neglecting Victoria's needs, but he had no way of finding out. It would hardly do to approach Buckingham Palace and ask whether the Queen's skin appeared suitably moist. . . .

Three weeks passed. There were now less than seven days until the coronation, and no sign of Victoria.

This evening found Cowperthwait preparing to embark one more time on another fruitless round of searching. On the point of setting out, a wave of ennui swept over him. He felt as if all his bones had been instantly removed.

"Nails, I fear I cannot continue this Sisyphean task. At least not tonight."

"Cain't say I blame you, Coz. I'm plumb tuckered out myself. What say we swing 'round to de Mallet's, and take it easy for one night?"

"A capital idea, Nails. Although I fear I'm too weary to endure the embraces of any doxy, the atmosphere should prove congenial."

Leaving the house, they encountered Tiptoft asleep

under the front portico. Stepping quietly over the lad, so as not to awake him and be forced to endure a whirlwind of sweeping, they set out for Regent's Street.

At the carved oak door of de Mallet's luxurious establishment they employed the gilt knocker in the shape of a copulating couple and were quickly admitted by the majordomo. Their hats were taken, glasses of champagne were proffered on a golden salver, and soon Cowperthwait and McGroaty were seated in the large hall room, watching couples dance to the stately strains of Mozart flowing from a gilt pianoforte, and eyeing appreciatively the corseted trollops sprawled on velvet chaises around the four walls.

The only incident momentarily to jar Cowperthwait's composure occurred when he thought he detected a flash of reflected candlelight in an oddly fluted piece of silver borne aloft at nose-height across the crowded room. But if the glint indeed indicated the presence of Lord Chuting-Payne, that specter did not materialize any more solidly, and Cowperthwait, by dint of his mental discipline, soon succeeded in banishing such fears.

Cowperthwait switched from champagne to Madeira, and the room soon took on an ethereal glow. The candleabra appeared to waver and flare, like will-o-the-wisps. McGroaty disappeared at one point, presumably to display his Chickasaw scars to some lucky round-heels, and Cowperthwait found himself nodding off to sleep. He dozed for a while and awoke feeling more refreshed than he had in ages. It was at this point that Madame de Mallet approached him.

Tall and buxom, swamped with jewels, perhaps overly made up for some tastes, in the fashion of an older period, de Mallet was a well-preserved seventy. Rumor had it that she had been a chambermaid to Marie Antoinette (and sometime bedpartner of Louis), and had barely escaped the Revolution with her life.

"M'sieur Cowperthwait, may I interest you in a lady tonight? We have a new addition to the house." Here de Mallet bent lower, and spoke in a whisper. "She is someone *très spéciale, un vrai bijou*. I do not offer her to *tout le monde*, only my favorites. I can guarantee that it will be the chance of a lifetime."

Cowperthwait was momentarily intrigued, but, not wishing to disturb his serenity with the rigors of carnal love, he ultimately declined. With a shrug, Madame de Mallet said, "*Très bien*, as you wish."

Feeling a pressure of a different sort emanating from his bladder, however, Cowperthwait said, "I could make use of a chamberpot, though."

Madame de Mallet waved her beringed hand airily. "You are familiar with the house. But piddle," she advised, "with discretion and a minimum of noise, please. *La chambre à côté du pissoir*, it is occupied."

Cowperthwait got unsteadily to his feet. He made his tipsy way up the grand staircase, colliding off various couples in an illustration of Brownian motion which appealed to him.

In the second-floor corridor he began counting doors, but soon lost track. Cowperthwait opened what he recalled to be the correct door.

It was not.

Two women were in the room. One, clothed in a plain chemise, sat at a veneered secretary, her back to Cowperthwait as she vigorously scribbled in a small book. Upon hearing the door open, she cradled her arms around the diary, as if to shield its contents, and dropped her face down upon it.

The second woman, a veritable Amazon, filled the rumpled bed with her Junoesque naked body. Lying spreadeagled on her back, hands clasped behind and pillowing her head, she wore on her features an expression most obviously betokening sexual satiation.

"Otto!" exclaimed Cowperthwait.

Lady Cornwall was not embarrassed. "Yes, Cosmo, it's I. How may I help you?"

Cowperthwait sank into a handy chair and held his head in his hands. "A daughter of Lesbos. No wonder you had no interest in my proposal. I should have guessed, from your mannish ways. How convenient for your perversion, you keeping all those young helpless chicks as your wards—"

Lady Cornwall leapt from bed and slapped Cowperthwait across the face. "How dare you impugn my motives! My girls are treated as chaste as nuns. Why do you think I'm buying my love in this place, if you imagine I sate my desires at the school?"

Lady Cornwall sat down on the bed and began to cry.

Cowperthwait could think of nothing to say or do except to mutter a useless apology and leave.

Finding the privy, he relieved his bladder. What a farce life was, he thought as he piddled. Missing queens, news on the throne, Sapphic saviors . . .

Ruefully buttoning his fly, Cowperthwait returned to the main salon.

The current piece of music was just ending. Cowperthwait was startled to see McGroaty standing next to the piano. A borrowed fiddle was tucked under his chin.

"Ladies and gents, pick up yer feet. Yer about to be entertained by some authentic Virginny foot-stompin' reels. Hit it, Wolfgang!"

McGroaty immediately began an enthusiastic sawing, the pianist managed to master the beat, and the floor was soon filled with energetically twirling couples. Cowperthwait found himself engaged by a red-haired whore and spun about. Reluctant at first, he found the lively music to be just the tonic his tired blood needed, after the dismaying revelation upstairs, and he was soon cavorting more spiritedly than anyone else. Within minutes the dancers had stepped back to form a circle at the center of which Cowperthwait and his partner performed.

Cowperthwait's head was spinning. He couldn't remember when he had felt so wonderful. Damn all his troubles! By God, he'd give everyone a show! He hoped Otto was watching. Picking up his partner by the waist, he began a particularly acrobatic maneuver. At that moment, two things happened simultaneously. From the spectators a disdainful voice said, "What an ignorant and savage display—" At the same instant, Cowperthwait lost his footing and launched his partner out of his sweat-slick hands and through the air.

After Cowperthwait had picked himself up off the floor and dusted himself off, he thought to look for the red-haired girl.

Her fall had been inadvertently cushioned by the body of Lord Chuting-Payne, who in so doing had lost his nose. The dead tissue and gaping holes in the center of face were revealed before the whole room. Strong men fainted and women screamed.

Chuting-Payne calmly accepted his nose back from Gumpetty and stuck it back on his face. Unfortunately, it was upside down.

"Dawn tomorrow at my estate, Cowperthwait. Your choice of weapons."

Watching the misassembled nobleman haughtily depart, Cowperthwait wondered briefly if he could convince Chuting-Payne to agree to flying sword-canes at fifty paces.

6. Treachery At Carking Fardels

In the flickering light of a candle, Cowperthwait peered into the looking glass atop the chiffonier in the hallway and nervously adjusted his cravat. It wouldn't do to meet his predictable death looking less than a fashionable gentleman. He wouldn't give Chuting-Payne the satisfaction of standing over his corpse and uttering some cutting remark about the failings of his haberdasher.

A door creaked. In the mirror, Cowperthwait saw McGroaty appear behind him, carrying a parcel wrapped in oilcloth. He turned.

"It done took me some time to find where I laid it up, but here it is."

"Here what is?"

"The key to you blowin' that dirty skunk offen the face of the earth." McGroaty began to tenderly unwrap the object within the greasy rags. Soon lay revealed an enormous weapon, a product of the Colt Arms Manufactory in Connecticut. The gun had a barrel as long as a loaf of French bread, with a bore of commensurate diameter. The chamber appeared designed to hold projectiles the size of Cowperthwait's fingers.

The naturalist attempted to pick up the pistol. He found himself unable to heft it one-handed, and perforce had to grasp the giant's weapon with both. He made as if to draw a bead on the stuffed orang-utan at the hall's end. His arms shook with the effort of supporting the pistol's weight, and the gun barrel wavered through an arc of several inches.

McGroaty was smiling earnestly at Cowperthwait's target practice. "That's the trick, Coz! Yer onto it now! You may not reckon it, but yer holdin' the world's finest Peacemaker. I done toted this little honey all over the globe, and she never let me down once. Hellfire, you don't even got to hit nothin' vital to kill that polecat. Jest whang him in the fingertip and he'll likely die of shock. I blowed the head offen a buffalo with this darlin' from a hunderd yards away."

Cowperthwait laid the monstrous gun back among the rags. His arms were quivering. "No, Nails, I'm afraid

not. It simply wouldn't be sporting, since we haven't its mate to offer Chuting-Payne. And I fear I'd be stone dead before I could lift your Colt up to fire. No, you'd best fetch my father's set. It's time we were off."

Reluctantly McGroaty wrapped up his gun, breathed a sigh of consternation, as if unable to fathom Cowperthwait's finicky morals, and went off to secure the aforementioned pistols.

Soon he returned with a mahogany box. Cowperthwait lifted the lid. Inside, nestled in velvet depressions, were a brace of small pearl-handled pistols.

The selfsame guns purchased by Clive Cowperthwait in anticipation of his duel with Marc Isambard Brunel.

Cowperthwait shed a tear at the thought of his father and mother, and the whole tragic family history. He thought also of Ikky Brunel, who had just promised him a guided tour of *The Great Western*, the marvelous transatlantic steamship about to have its maiden voyage. Now it looked as if he would never witness that marvel of this wondrous age. Ah, life—how bittersweet. . . .

"Very good," said Cowperthwait, closing the lid. "That leaves only a few points of unfinished business. Nails, keep this on your person. It's my last will and testament. You'll find that you're my sole heir."

McGroaty wiped his eyes. "Reckon I'd better make out my own then, cuz I'll be coolin' my heels in the calaboose afore I swing by the neck."

"Why?"

"When Chuting-Payne croaks you, I aim to croak him."

"Nails, I appreciate the sentiment, but please don't. It would stain the family honor."

"Ain't nothing you could do to stop me, Coz, but I promise anyhow."

"Very good. Now, here is a letter for Lady Cornwall, along with the last of my growth factor for her ward, Vicky. Please make sure she gets them."

McGroaty overcame his disdain of the Lyceum mistress enough to agree to this.

"Excellent. Finally, be so good as to fetch Tiptoft."

When the sweep appeared, straws in his hair and rubbing crumbs of sleep from his eyes, Cowperthwait handed him an envelope.

"Tiptoft, here's a draft on my bank for a hundred pounds. You are hereby discharged from my services."

"Hurrah!" shouted the lad. "I'm off to Australia to make my fortune!"

Cowperthwait patted the sweep on the head and saw him out the door. Turning to McGroaty, he said, "Let's go. We don't want to keep the noble bastard waiting."

In the trap, rattling through the empty predawn London streets, Cowperthwait tried to gauge his feelings. He was remarkably calm and clear-headed, especially considering neither he nor McGroaty had gotten any sleep since the fracas at de Mallet's just a few hours ago. He was surprised to find that the prospect of his imminent death did not trouble him in the least. It seemed, rather, a relief to know that everything would soon be over. The failure of his experiments with the salamander, followed by the frustrating and enervating quest for the human Victoria and his disillusionment with Lady Corn-

wall, had left him weary and dispirited. There seemed little left in life to engage his interests, and, despite his physiological youth, he felt himself a veritable greybeard. Better to have it over with now, than drag through life with this premature ennui. . . .

Soon they had left the sprawling metropolis behind. In under an hour, they were approaching Carking Fardels, the ancestral estates of the Chuting-Payne family, of whom Cowperthwait's nemesis was the last direct descendant. The sky was lightening in various sherbet tones, birds were trilling, and breezes were stirring the mists that writhed among the underbrush. It looked as if it would be a fine day on which to meet one's demise.

McGroaty turned the trap onto a lane that diverged from the tollroad. Beneath fresh mint-green foliage they rolled, until they came to a large pair of gates. Waiting there was the magnificent figure of Gunputty.

Leaning close to his employer, the American said, "Iffen you can ee-liminate ol' Tinface by some scientific slight-o'-hand, Coz, go for it without worryin' about his second. I got a scheme to sap that fuzzy-wuzzy's will."

Cowperthwait sighed deeply. "Please, Nails, no shenanigans that will spoil my exit from this mortal coil."

"Just leave that human mountain to me, Chief," finished up McGroaty mysteriously. At this juncture, the fuzzy-wuzzy in question leaped silently up as postillion and, clutching the carriage's superstructure, waved them on toward their mortal rendezvous.

Across a dewy field, the trap leaving glistening tracks, and to the edge of a copse of speckled alders, Gunputty disembarked and led the way beneath the trees.

A small discreet clearing was to be found amidst the trees, just wide enough for the requisite paces.

Standing nonchalantly there was Lord Chuting-Payne, dressed in morning-coat and spats. His nose was correctly positioned, and had been buffed to perfection. Cowperthwait could see himself in it.

"I had my doubts as to your showing up," said Chuting-Payne. Cowperthwait let the insult pass. He felt serenely exalted above such pettifoggery. "I trust you brought suitable weapons. . . ."

Cowperthwait silently held up a hand, and McGroaty laid the pistol-box in it. Chuting-Payne advanced, opened the receptacle and selected a gun. "A splendid model, if a bit antique. I recall that the last time I used such a gun was to perform a trick for the Earl of Malmesbury. He tossed a deck of cards into the air, and I shot only those which would beat the hand of euchre which he simultaneously flashed before my eyes."

McGroaty spat into the grass. Chuting-Payne sneered. "There will soon be a brighter, more vital fluid staining the lawn here, my man, so don't waste your precious substance. Well, there's no point in delaying any further, is there?"

McGroaty and Gunputty stepped aside. Cowperthwait noticed his man whispering into the lowered ear of the turbaned Titan, and the next thing he knew, the two seconds had vanished behind a tree.

But there was no time to ponder their actions further.

Cowperthwait and Chuting-Payne advanced to the



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center of the clearing and stood back to back. Mist coiled around their ankles.

"On the count of three, we begin walking for twenty paces, turn—completely, mind you, for I have no second nose to lose—and fire at will. One, two, three. . . ."

The walk seemed miles. Cowperthwait felt a small wild animal striving to claw its way to freedom within him, but suppressed it. Soon, soon. . . .

Twenty paces. Turn.

Chuting-Payne stood negligently, with arms folded across his chest, allowing Cowperthwait first shot. The inventor raised his gun, shut his eyes, and fired.

Lifting his eyelids, he saw a robin fall dead from the tree behind the Lord.

Chuting-Payne smiled and brought his pistol up. "Before you die, Mister Cowperthwait, I just want you to know that I have found our common Grail. And the scandal I intend to cause with what I have learned will topple the throne, and more than adequately recompense me for the insults I have suffered. Now, address your prayers to your maker, Mister Cowperthwait."

Chuting-Payne aimed confidently at Cowperthwait, who closed his eyes again, for the last time.

The shot rang out.

Miraculously, Cowperthwait felt nothing. How grand! He had been right not to fear. . . . Paradise, hello!

Cowperthwait opened his eyes.

Chuting-Payne lay dead on the turf, the back of his head blown off in a gory mess.

It dawned slowly on Cowperthwait what must have happened. "McGroaty! Goddamn you, McGroaty, you promised! That was hardly sportsmanlike!"

Out from the trees stepped a figure: Viscount Melbourne. The Prime Minister clutched a smoking pistol.

"William—I don't—How? Why?"

The dapper nobleman calmly removed the spent cartridge from his gun and substituted a fresh one. "I could hardly let Chuting-Payne continue to live now, Cosmo, could I? After what he just said about his plans to embroil Victoria in a hideous scandal. Not after all the work the two of us have put into keeping her name unsoiled. And besides, I rather like you, and owed you a favor. I consider that debt discharged."

"But you said you didn't believe in assassination."

"That was of women, boy. Entirely different set of rules for the other sex. No, I fear Chuting-Payne's treasonous intentions earned him his death. And besides, without heirs his estate devolves to the throne. I've had my eye on it for years."

A thought occurred suddenly to Cowperthwait. "The Queen! He knew where she was! Now the knowledge is gone with him."

Melbourne seemed queerly unconcerned. "Yes, rum bit of luck, that. But I could hardly wait any longer to bag him."

A sudden malaise swept over the young scientist, leaving him disinclined to press the matter further. All he wished now was to be home in bed. Thoughts of those welcoming counterpanes brought up an associated matter, which he now put to the Viscount.

"My creation—it's been so long since I've had any news from you. Is she flourishing? Does she ever seem to—pine for her old surroundings?"

Melbourne sought to brush the matter aside. "She does well. Her needs are simple, and easily fulfilled. Most of them, at any rate . . . if you know what I mean, eh?"

Cosmo opened his mouth to adjure the Minister not to overtax the chimeric creature, but Melbourne cut him off.

"Well, you'd best be heading home. Oh, don't worry—there'll be no legal repercussions. The Crown will handle matters."

From out of the woods appeared McGroaty, accompanied by Gunputty. Melbourne raised his pistol, anticipating deadly action from the servant on behalf of his wronged master. Cowperthwait too fully expected that the loyal Indian servant would attempt to revenge his master's death.

But instead, the Indian merely beamed a bright smile their way! Picking McGroaty up like a child, he trotted eagerly toward them.

"Nails, what—?"

"Everything's jake, Coz. I just finished explainin' something mighty beneficial to ol' Ganpat here. That's his real name, by the way, after some heathen god or other. I managed to instill some demmy-cratc ideals in him, made him see that iffen his master was to die, he'd be a free man, able to make his fortune with his good looks and exotic ways. We're plannin' to get him a job with P. T. Barnum, who's blowin' in through town soon. He does a mean snake-charmin' act."

Cowperthwait sighed. A regrettable lack of remorse all around here.

But life must go on, he supposed.

Mustn't it?

7. What Everyone Else Knew

Cowperthwait slept for a day and a half. His dreams, if any, were painless, and vanished upon waking.

Standing over him was McGroaty, bearing a tray heaped high with lavishly buttered scones, a decanter of tea, and a lidded crystal pot full of fresh strawberry jam.

"I thought you might need some vittles by now, Coz."

Cowperthwait sat up in bed, plumping the pillows behind himself. "Quite right, Nails. Time to fortify the hody before attempting to tackle the problems of the mind that yet beset us."

"I couldn't'a phrased it no better myself."

Cowperthwait dug hungrily into the repast. He was amazed at his hunger, having expected to bear some lingering anxiety and consequent loss of appetite over the death of Chuting-Payne. However, even the resemblance of the strawberry jam to Chuting-Payne's spilled brains was not sufficient to dismay him.

As he ate, Cowperthwait pondered the problem of Victoria.

Chuting-Payne had claimed to know her hiding place. It was obvious the knowledge was fresh, for during a recent meeting last week—at the establishment of a

Jewish money-lender reputed to occasionally harbor runaway children—Chuting-Payne had been as obviously ignorant as ever. Therefore, he must have discovered it just prior to the contretemps at de Mallet's—

De Mallet's, Cowperthwait ceased to chew. An image of the old bawd materialized vividly before his slack-jawed face.

"Someone *très spéciale* . . . chance of a lifetime . . ."

It couldn't be—could it? De Mallet's establishment was the first place Melbourne would have searched. The only reason Cowperthwait hadn't bothered himself was that certainty. And yet—

Tossing back the blankets, Cowperthwait sent his breakfast flying. "Nails! Nails!"

McGroaty ambled in unconcernedly while Cowperthwait was attempting to insert both lower limbs into a single trousers leg.

"Nails, we must hurry with all dispatch to Madame de Mallet's."

McGroaty winked. "Takin' care o' some other needs now, I reckon."

"Nails, you're hopeless. Just ready the transportation."

Soon Cowperthwait found himself admitted by a sleepy and disheveled majordomo into the empty parlors of Madame de Mallet's. (McGroaty was waiting outside; should Cowperthwait's hunch prove correct, it would hardly do to have the uncouth ruffian present to embarrass the delicate sensibilities of the woman he now fully expected to meet.) The gilt fixtures and flocked wall-coverings appeared tawdry in the light of day that diffused through the drawn heavy drapes. There was a nauseating odor of spilled champagne and stale bodily excretions. The place wore a face far different from its glamorous nighttime image. Cowperthwait wondered which manifestation, if either, was closer to reality.

Hand on the staircase rail, Cowperthwait was hailed by the servant. "Ey now, gov'nor, you can't disturb the girls at this hour—"

"Oh, shut up, man! I'm not here for a roger. For Agassiz's sake, why is everyone so blasted fixated on their privates?"

In the upstairs corridor something drew Cowperthwait unerringly toward the room that had once held the salamandrine Victoria. At the door, he knocked softly. A feminine voice responded.

"Is it night already? I feel like I've hardly slept. Come in, then, come in, I'm ready. . . ."

Cowperthwait twisted the handle and entered.

The chamber was curtained from the daylight, and lit only by a single candle. The match that had just ignited the tallowed wick was being puffed to extinction by the pursed lips of the woman in bed.

Woman, yes. Now she was plainly a girl no longer.

Victoria's long hair was a soft brown, halfway between the flaxen color of her youth and the foregone darker shade of her maturity. Her face was round and still somehow innocent, her nose and chin somewhat pronounced. She would, Cowperthwait suspected, never look more radiant.

The Queen possessed a commanding gaze which Cow-

perthwait now found hard to disengage from his own. At last doing so, he took in the rest of Victoria's dishabille.

She lay with the covers thrown back, wearing the sheerest of peignoirs. Her bust and hips were full, giving some hint of a future stockiness, and she looked ripe for bearing many children. Cowperthwait was suddenly certain that it would not be long before a new little Prince or Princess graced the land.

Yet this maternal aspect of Victoria was still implicit, not dominant. At the moment, she looked anything but motherly. Her exquisite body yet unmarred by any pregnancies, she was as inviting a woman as any Cowperthwait had seen.

On a card-table in a corner was a partially completed dissected picture, one of the puzzles Victoria enjoyed assembling. Next to it rested her inevitable diary.

Cowperthwait dropped to one knee. "Your Majesty—"

Victoria's voice was throaty. Cowperthwait knew she had trouble with septic tonsils. "You can forget all titles now, silly boy. I'm not Queen here. In this house, there are others who know so much more than I, and deserve that title. But I'm learning. Come here, and I'll show you."

Victoria lifted her arms out imploringly. Shocked, Cowperthwait stood and came to sit on the edge of the bed where he could press his case more convincingly.

"Your Majesty, I realize that the demands of your high office have caused you untold grief, and that it is only natural you would seek to forget all your troubles by adopting a wanton's role. But you must realize that the nation needs you. The coronation is imminent. And do not forget the personal anguish you have caused your Prime Minister, Viscount Melbourne is beside himself, wondering where you are."

"Whatever are you talking about, you foolish man? It was Melbourne who put me here."

Cowperthwait felt as if his brain were about to tear itself apart. "Melbourne—?"

"Yes, Lambie told me it would be part of my education. And he was so right. Why, I've met many of the most important figures in the country, on more intimate terms than I could ever achieve in the sterile corridors of state. Writers, artists, members of Parliament, educators. Men and women both. Why, there were even some common laborers who had saved up their money for ages. And the talk has been almost as stimulating as the loving. The secrets I've learned, the bonds I've forged, the self-confidence I've cultivated, not to mention the tricks I've learned that will certainly please my darling Albert when we've married—These will stand me in good stead for my whole reign. I shan't have any trouble getting my way from now on, I feel. Oh, I've enjoyed it so! It's a shame it's almost over."

Cowperthwait tried to find his tongue. "Then you have no intention of abdicating?"

"Of course not! I'm returning to the Palace tomorrow, for the coronation rehearsal. It's all arranged. Now, forget all this talk of matters politic, dear boy. Come here to your little Victoria. Let her make everything all better."

Victoria flung her arms about Cowperthwait, pulled him down and began unbuttoning his fly.

At first hesitant, Cowperthwait soon began enthusiastically to comply.

After all, one simply did not casually disobey one's sovereign, however demanding the request. . . .

It was no trouble to break into Buckingham Palace under the cover of darkness. Security was quite primitive. As an example, in December of 1838, "the boy Cotton" would finally be apprehended, after inhabiting the Palace uncaught for several months. Twelve years of age, he was perpetually covered in soot, having often concealed himself in chimneys. He blackened the beds he chose to sleep in, broke open sealed letters to the Queen, stole certain small geegaws and food, and when caught was found to be wearing a pair of Melbourne's trousers.

Cowperthwait did not encounter "the boy Cotton" as he made his way down the echoing passages that night toward the Queen's private bedroom. He followed the directions Victoria had graciously given him earlier that day, after their bout. Cowperthwait had explained his involvement in the subterfuge surrounding Victoria's absence. It turned out the Queen knew nothing about the mock Victoria occupying her bed with Melbourne, and he thought he could detect no small jealousy on her part. He did not envy Melbourne the explaining he would have to do tomorrow.

At the same time, Cowperthwait was quite angry with the way the Prime Minister had duped him. He was now determined to secure his Victoria, and have it out with the man.

Only once did Cowperthwait encounter anyone, a patrolling Beefeater whom he avoided by ducking into a niche holding a bust of Ethelred the Unready.

At last Cowperthwait stood outside the royal bedchambers. Without knocking, he let himself in.

Melbourne lay abed with the salamander. When the newswall Cowperthwait she let out a croak of joyous recognition and slithered out of bed. Completely hairless, her sinuous form combined mammalian and amphibian characteristics in an unearthly beauty. The wig she used to impersonate the Queen graced a stand across the room.

Melbourne leapt naked out of bed, his burly hairy body a gross contrast to the ethereal, sylphlike splendor of the hellbender.

"Sir," uttered Cowperthwait, "I know all! You have tricked me in a dastardly fashion. I suppose you had the interests of the country at heart, but I believe there was also a component of unholy lust in your actions. I now reclaim my ward, and leave you to your conscience."

Cowperthwait took Victoria's hand and turned to go.

Melbourne grabbed her other hand and held on. "No, don't take her. You're right, I am besotted with this creature of yours, have been from the moment I first had her at de Mallet's. I couldn't stand the notion of others enjoying her. The Queen's sojourn away, already long planned, seemed the perfect excuse to arrogate the new to myself. I can't do without her now!"

"Sir, let go," Cowperthwait urged, tugging on Victoria. "Do not make me employ force with you."

Melbourne did not listen, but instead continued to pull on the newt. Cowperthwait pulled back, and there ensued a tugging match which soon grew to ferocious proportions.

Without warning Melbourne suddenly shot backward onto the bed.

Looking down, he found himself holding Victoria's severed twitching arm, from which dripped a pale fluid.

"My God!" cried the Prime Minister. "Where have my brutish lusts led me!" He dropped the limb and, cradling his head in his hands, began to weep.

Cowperthwait looked at the Prime Minister with disgust. "You have abused a helpless animal, and now feel the appropriate pangs. Let it be a lesson to you that even the highest worldly powers are not exempted from common morality. You may take comfort from the fact that Victoria will quickly regenerate her arm, as she still possesses that newtlike faculty."

Tossing a blanket around the uncomplaining creature, Cowperthwait said, "Come, dear, let us go." He left Melbourne weeping.

In the hansom cab heading home, cradling Victoria's elongated head against his chest, Cowperthwait mused aloud.

"I could wish it were Lady Cornwall by my side at this moment, dear Victoria, but what good would such impossible longing do? No, it is you and I, poor thing. You and I once more."

Cowperthwait stroked her head, and Victoria butted it against the underside of his chin.

"Ah, my dear, you have been through many rigors in your unnatural life. And much as any man loves his creations, I can only hope that your existence is not further prolonged by very many days. If only I knew your natural span . . ."

And with that sentiment echoing in the coach, the vehicle rolled on through the night, through the decades—through sixty-three years, until February 1, 1901, when the same city thoroughfare, draped with purple and white banners (Victoria had in her will asked that the black hangings she abhorred be banned) was thronged with weeping crowds watching the horsedrawn gun-carriage bearing the short coffin of their elderly Queen make its slow way from Victoria Station to Paddington Station, on its way to the mausoleum at Windsor.

Among the mourners was a hunched figure dressed in black, her face veiled from sight. She was accompanied by an elderly bald man with a moony face, leaning on a cane whose hairline joint revealed it to be of a deadly nature. The duo were soon joined by a gap-toothed old codger who was slyly tucking a wallet not his own into his breast pocket.

"So long ago," said Cowperthwait. "But the cards at Christmas never stopped coming."

"Wimmen air like elleyfants," said McGroaty. "They never forget."

And as if in silent agreement, Victoria pulled back her veil and snapped a passing fly from the air. ♦

The Hand That Snaps the Lock Shut

Adrian Nikolas Phoenix

Dray slouched against the black brick face of Club Le Morte and tucked her hands into the pockets of her faded jeans. Fright-junkies whispered into the speaker hidden in the club's shadowed entryway, their voices raw and desperate. Wanting inside. Craving their nightly fix of terror. Snorting in disgust, Dray tuned out the black noise of their wounded voices. Her thief-sharp gaze scanned the people walking past her on the rain-spattered sidewalk. A restless Friday night crowd, cruising for sex, drugs, and danger, and anything else the Zoo had to offer.

Sighing, Dray shifted, bracing one leg against the brick behind her, and felt unaccustomed weight dragging at the right-hand pocket of her denim jacket. A trickle of fear and awe iced her spine. She resisted the urge to touch the Browning's cold, smooth barrel. Time enough for that later, she thought. Then she was doing what she had sworn she would not do—thinking of Synthia. Thinking of her Kohl-lined blue eyes, of the musky way she smelled after sex, of how she would die once Dray found her. Dray thumped the back of her head against the brick. *Great. Seventeen years old despite what your folks, Juvie, and the streets tossed at ya, kinda late in the game to turn senti-*



Illustration by Janet Aulisio

mental dumbshit. The Keeper gave you a task. Someone's got to keep their oath to the Guild. Syn didn't.

But the doing wasn't the problem. She was afraid it would be too easy.

A pair of muscle-jocks strutted through the crowd wearing only studded leather G-strings and body paint. Dray smirked as gazes ranging from envious/disgusted to hungry/angry slid over the hard pecs, tits and thighs gleaming under the neons. Shit, for some people being watched was better than anything slammed into a vein or patched directly into the jerk-off centers of the brain. Not for her. Dray tucked in a loose strand of red hair that had escaped the knit cap she wore and fallen into her eyes. Raccoon-wise, she avoided attention.

A dancer-lean figure in black leather jacket, pants, and steel-toed boots slipped free of the crowd. Light flickered along the barrel of the sawed-off shotgun cradled in the crook of his arm. Dray's smile faded. Street-soldier. He walked towards her in long-legged, easy strides. A fringe of leather-wrapped braids fell past his shoulders, framing his dark face. Silver glinted around his throat. Dray chewed her lower lip. Her hands dug deeper into her pockets. *Well, Kree, she thought. Taking a break from patrol or spying for the Keeper?*

Kree stopped beside her and leaned one shoulder against the building. "Hey," he said. "How's hunting?" Dray shrugged. "Been better. How's it going for you?" She slid her gaze to the street, muscles knotted, hoping he wouldn't mention Synthia. Or the memory chip that had disappeared with her.

"Kinda quiet for a Friday night," Kree said. He stepped closer, gravel crunching beneath his boots. Leather creaked.

Dray shrugged again and forced herself to remain still. Kree was too close. His heat and tension coiled into her until her muscles ached. He smelled hot and bitter like spilled blood. "What do you want, Kree?" she asked, heart pounding. "Why are you bugging me?" The brick at her back scratched at her shoulder blades through her jacket.

"Father's worried about you."

A smile tugged at Dray's lips. *Father*. Once she had loved the Keeper enough to call him Father, too. "Well, he doesn't have to worry. I know my duty. I know Guild law." Movement across the street caught her attention. She narrowed her eyes, grateful for something else to focus on besides the wolf.

"That ain't the problem, Dray," Kree said. "Nobody's questioning that."

The movement across the street resolved itself into a trenchcoated figure picking its way through the heaps of trash and gutted, graffitied cars marking the unofficial border between uptown Portland and the Zoo. Bouncing up onto the sidewalk, the man paused to brush off his boot-tops and straighten his shades before joining the sidewalk traffic. Dray's fingers tingled. She had him zeroed. An uptown zombie. Pretending to be part of the wildlife. But he was out of sync with the neon-laced, slick-as-sweat dance of the street.

Hunting time. Dray pulled her hands from her pocket.

Time to go before Kree opened his mouth about Synthia. "Tell the Keeper everything's cool, okay?" she said, stepping away from the club. She kept her gaze on the zombie. The hem on his stylish trench hung a tad low on the right side. The difference was so slight that she had almost missed it. *You're in the Zoo now, shit-head. You can't bide a wallet from a raccoon. You came downtown to play, we'll play.*

"Dray, wait." Kree's voice was low, a near-whisper. "I'm a little . . . worried too."

Dray glanced at him, surprised, not sure she'd heard right. His dark eyes were unreadable. He lowered the shotgun to his side, his fingers white-knuckled around its stock. He was only a year or two older than she was, but he made her feel hunched, small and tight—a ten-year-old waiting for her father's fist or for his hug.

Kree touched a finger to the Guild tattoo on his left forearm. "Look," he said. Even though she knew what was there, etched into his flesh, Dray looked, his intensity a hand to the back of her neck.

Laser-drawn and night-glo filled, the word PORTLAND was bannered in blue above an open padlock, and below, gold on fight-scarred brown skin, was a wolf's head. Kree's badge of rank in the Guild for the Homeless and Outcast. Just like his braids.

"We're family," he said. "We chose. And that beats the shit outta any blood ties or any before-Guild vows. You reading me?"

Dray thought of her own tattoo. Thought of the laser's heat, the spicy smell of night-glo. Thought of the warm, cable-tight inner thrum of *belonging, of purpose*. Her finger traced the raccoon face on the back of her hand. "Yeah," she said. "Yeah, I read you. So, why . . . ?" She pointed at the long chain padlocked around his throat. A dog's lead, it looked like. The lock rested against his T-shirt-covered collarbone.

"A reminder," he murmured. "I know what it's like to lose a partner." Then he left, wading into the crowd, shotgun at his hip.

Dray stared after him, feeling as raw as the frightened voices. He was the one. She'd heard that a wolf had been caught selling little kids and runaways to the uptown Toymakers. His partner had killed him. On the sidewalk Kree kicked the ass of a skinhead trying to boost a bottle of Night Train from a wino. With those steel-toed boots, Kree didn't have to kick hard or more than once.

Good thing the skinhead ain't Guild, Dray thought, turning away and searching for her mark. Or Kree would've blasted his chickenshit guts out through his spine and onto the sidewalk. Her fingers brushed against the hard lump in her jacket pocket. Like he had with his own partner. The wolves enforced Guild law and protected those who couldn't protect themselves. Kree was good at both.

Had Kree knelt beside his partner and looked into his eyes as death sucked out their light, or had he simply pulled the trigger and walked away? Spotting the trenchcoated zombie moving through the crowd, Dray walked away from Club Le Morte and her thoughts of Kree. Not

only was she a sentimental dumbshit, she was a morbid one as well. She felt a grin pull at her lips. All she had to do right now was dip into the zombie's pocket and leave him a few ounces lighter. No problem.

But it was her first hurt without Synthia.

A memory flash of laughter, dancing fingers, and blonde spiky hair left Dray feeling gut-punched and as out of sync with the action around her as the zombie she followed.

That bitch.

"Yeah, well, fuck her," Dray whispered. Her hands knotted into fists. "I can do it alone." For some reason that truth hurt even more.

She weaved through the crowd, her sneakers squelching against the wet concrete. The tribal rhythm of the Zoo oozed into Dray, filling the places her memories of Synthia had gutted with a blood-warm sense of belonging. With it came the resonating drumbeat of the Guild laws. *Obey the Keeper. Protect and nurture the sheep. Do not prey against your own. You are responsible for your partner's actions. Keep faith or die.* Dray shivered in the ebb and flow of night-charged energy and buttoned her jacket.

The zombie stopped beside a group of people semi-circled around a mohawk-maned boy sitting cross-legged on the damp sidewalk. The boy's dirty knees poked through the rips in his jeans. Dray uncured her fingers, relieved that the zombie's attention was fixed on the forecaster. Sweat trickled down her side. Normally, distraction was Synthia's job.

The forecaster unknotted a paisley scarf from around his throat. He kissed the scarf, eyes half-closed, before smoothing it out on the sidewalk.

Time. Dray hunched her shoulders. Dropping her gaze to the tops of her sneakers, she allowed herself to drift.

The boy scooped up his circuit-board runes and shook them. Their tinny clacking blasted through Dray's hunt-hyped senses like a shotgun. She plowed into the zombie. Light pinwheeled from the circuit-boards as they tumbled from the forecaster's hands and onto the scarf.

The zombie's breath escaped him in a startled "oof." He clutched at Dray for balance. Her hands whispered up, inside and away. Boots and battered sneakers scuffed the pavement.

Dray shoved free. "Watch it," she said.

The zombie shook his head muttering. He stepped past her, his attention once again on the forecaster.

Problems with his lover, with business maybe. Dray thought, sliding his wallet into one of her jacket's inside pockets. *Hope he doesn't ask the forecaster for a financial reading.* Smiling, she walked away.

Where you go I will follow.

Dray froze. Her skin prickled. She hadn't heard that. Not possible. Heart pounding, she turned, then walked back to where the forecaster sat. The watchers grudgingly moved aside for her, sensing somehow that she had been called. The boy's face was strained and sweat-shiny, his body tensed. His gaze locked with Dray's, his eyes wild and bright. Drug-lit, maybe. Burning with a cold blue fire. Like the one flaring to life within her, searing her guts with ice.

Fuck. The word circled through Dray's mind. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.* The forecaster's fingers traced over the runes scattered on the paisley scarf. Tracing and retracing a pattern that maybe only his fingertips with their chewed-down nails recognized. His lips moved, framing words, but the voice Dray heard through the pulse thundering in her ears was earnest, female, and familiar.

Where you go I will follow.

Dray's knees buckled and she nearly fell. *Yeah, I'd forgotten. That's another broken oath.* The boy sagged forward, elbows to knees. He closed his eyes. The connection between them fell away like a switchblade-sliced tendon. Dry-mouthed with shock, Dray whirled and half ran, half stumbled away down the sidewalk.

She dashed into an alley. As she splashed through a puddle, water soaked her socks and sneakers. Vows, oaths, words. Words she and Synthia had exchanged after being released from the Center for Displaced Juveniles in Boise nearly two years ago. Synthia's hand warm and soft within her own. Sunshine sparking bronze light off scarab earrings. *Where you go I will follow.* A stranger had given those words back to her, uttering them in a familiar, unsettling voice. Not Synthia's voice, though. Not husky enough.

Hurting over a form huddled on the ground, Dray skidded into a dumpster. She clutched at its rim for balance. Cold, damp metal bit into the underside of her fingers. Panting for air, she bowed her head and closed her eyes. Her stomach squeezed in on itself. *My voice,* she suddenly realized. *It was my voice that I heard.* She felt hot and cold at the same time and wondered if she was coming down with something. The blue fire the forecaster had set ablaze within her now burned red in her guts, and something snapped shut around her heart. The stink of slime-coated metal and rotting food surrounded her, making it hard for her to breathe. Dray cursed, but couldn't find the strength to move. Her rage had fused her to the dumpster.

You ever dream of living at the top of a glass and chrome tower, Dray?

Hub?

You know, a flame-haired boardroom princess ruling over the corporate elite and all in between and below, with me at your side. Your very own mysterious datamancer dressed in Eastern leathers and Western chains. What do you think?

Flame-haired? Datamancer? Gimme a break. Where do you get this stuff? I think you've been visiting the key-board too much, partner-o-mine. But I like that part about being at my side.

Dray shook back the memory. *Guess I wasn't listening too close.* She opened her eyes. Prying her fingers from the dumpster's rusty lip, she backed up several steps. She sucked in fresh air and stared at the purple indentations across the underside of her fingers.

Would you have followed Synthia if she had asked? Her hands trembled as she dug the zombie's wallet from her jacket pocket. She flipped it open. Pictures of a pretty, dark-haired woman with a stiff smile met her gaze. A boardroom princess, maybe? Dray thumbed through the

wallet's contents, plucking free a Northwest Technologies ID card, two credit chips and a handful of cash. She stuffed them back into her pocket and slam-dunked the wallet into the dumpster. The ID and chips she would turn over to the Keeper. The cash was hers to keep.

I might've gone Across the Street with her. I might've been her flame-haired princess. Why didn't she ask? Why'd she leave a note and just split instead? I would—

A sound reached Dray's ears, close and faint. She turned, listening. Someone was crying. A dry kind of whimper that meant the tears were all used up and the hurt had become habit. Yeah, a familiar sound. But one that belonged to her past. Dray glanced down at the huddled form she had almost tripped over in her race down the alley. Sneakers squishing with each step, she drew alongside the huddle and knelt on the gritty concrete.

A child stared up at her with red-rimmed, shadowed eyes. The little girl chewed on a lip already bloody from sharp baby teeth.

Keeping her hands in view, Dray smiled and said, "Hi there. I haven't seen you around before. You must be new. I'm Dray." The child continued to stare at her, too tired to scuttle away or even cringe. Just the kind of stuff uptown Toymakers looked for. *Good thing I got here first.* Dray pressed a hand against her own stomach. "Y'know, I'm kinda hungry. You look like you are too. Wanna come with me to a safehouse and get something to eat?"

The girl nodded, her hair swinging forward in greasy strands. "You won't hurt me too much?" she asked hopefully.

Dray's smile slipped. "I'm not gonna hurt you at all." Nodding again, the little girl stood. She looked at Dray, her gaze dubious, her eyes saying, *It's okay. The empty inside me is so big another ovie won't take up too much room.* "Hamburger," she said. "Fries."

Dray rose to her feet and offered her hand. After a moment, small cold fingers circled around her own. Closed. Again, the girl stated her price. "Hamburger. Fries."

Smiling, Dray shook her head. "You don't know the Guild kitchens. Stew, more likely. Maybe chili." She led the child from the alley, walking towards NW 6th Street and the closest Guild safehouse and kitchen.

Dray looked at the child walking beside her, at the shoes held together with silver duct tape. She fingered the cash in her pocket. "You know," she said through a throat gone tight, "I think we can manage to round up a burger and fries for you. Maybe even a milk shake."

The little girl's head tilted forward in a serious nod. Her fingers squeezed Dray's.

"Okay. Fast food first, then shelter." Dray altered their course, angling towards Broadway.

Dray led the greasy-food contented child up the warehouse's steps and pushed open the door. Suffocating warmth spread thick with the smells of coffee, boiled cabbage, and wet clothing washed over her as she stepped into the kitchen. The girl stopped, the door swinging shut behind her. Her gaze skipped around the large room. Several damp and weary street-types sat hunched on the benches flanking the cafeteria-style

tables, shoveling food into their mouths with one hand while the other rested like a five-membered security team over their baggie-bundled possessions. A pair of off-duty wolves had sprawled into sagging easy chairs, raindrops beaded like tiny crystals through their dreadlocks. A young man dressed in jeans and sweatshirt sauntered towards them. He smiled. His Guild tattoo and its fox face were visible on his arm. The child looked up at Dray, her eyes wide, panicked.

"It's okay," Dray murmured. "He's one of the people who take care of kids here. He's a guardian. No one will hurt you." She wondered if one of the serpent-rank med-techs were around. The kid should probably be checked over. Make sure she was okay. Physically, anyway.

"Hey," the fox said, hunkering down before the girl. "Howdy. Welcome to the Zoo, little one. Welcome home. What's your name?"

The girl pressed closer against Dray's leg, her fingers clamping around Dray's in a death grip.

"You know, I've got a lonely little teddy bear pining away for somebody special to tell his name to," the fox said. His voice was as soothing as a night light. "I bet if you held him and whispered your name to him real secret-like, he'd whisper his. Sound okay?"

"See that?" Dray pointed the girl's attention to the fox's open padlock tattoo. Shoving back her sleeve, she revealed her own tattoo. "When you see that mark, kiddo, know the person wearing it is safe. You can trust 'em." Guilt nudged her. She thought of Kree's dead partner and Synthia. She looked into the child's eyes, eyes as dark as a fright-junkie's burnt-out soul, then glanced away.

So much is at stake. Guild law is cold-hearted. But not as cold as betraying a child's trust.

Gnawing at her lower lip, the girl nodded. The young fox offered his hand. Reluctantly, she released Dray's and wrapped a finger around his pinky. Dray smiled at the tentative grip.

"Go on," Dray said. "It's okay. I'll see you later."

The girl trailed the fox across the room like a late afternoon shadow. The young man paused at the door leading to the upstairs shelter and gave Dray a thumbs-up before entering. The girl never looked back.

Drained, heavy with sudden exhaustion, Dray went into the kitchen for coffee. Her sneakers made sloppy sucking noises as she walked, and the chill from her wet socks had soaked into the rest of her body. She wanted to change her shoes, but wasn't ready to face the silence of her room.

Steamy-hot and laced with strong spicy smells, the kitchen was full of bustle and noise. The clink of dishes, a knife chopping through vegetables, the slam of a pot lid, laughter and low profanities. Dray fetched a mug from one of the cabinets and filled it with coffee. Gently elbowing her way past a worker dancing to her in-built stereo system, she left the kitchen. She slid onto a bench by the window. Wrapping cold fingers around the steaming mug, she glanced out the window. Her reflection, warped by neon-glare, stared back pensively, a stranger in black denim. The face was too pale, the eyes too dark, the figure too slender.

Synthia's voice reached her: *Ever dream of living in a tower of glass and chrome?* And Dray saw her, two years earlier in the Idaho sunshine, grinning, her excitement static electricity that zapped Dray every time they touched. *We're outta here. Where do you wanna go? The sky's a monitor and each city, each town is a letter on a keyboard. We can write anything we want. So what's the first letter? Where do you wanna go?*

Anywhere, as long as it's with you. Where you go—
—*I will follow.* She squeezed Dray's hand. Her smile was wicked, a twin bolt of lightning that struck Dray in the heart and the crotch. *We can be anything we want.*

Wrenching her gaze away from the window, Dray stared at the mug clenched between her hands. She doubted Cynthia would use the memory disk to harm the Guild, but she couldn't be sure. She hadn't expected Cynthia to split, either. Dray put her hand in her pocket. She trailed her fingers over the pistol, its barrel warm with her body heat.

The pain of drifting had begun to cripple her when the Keeper's wolves had discovered them living off boosted food beneath the Burnside Bridge. Cynthia had never stopped talking about the streamlined glamor of life Across the Street. Dray's future-vision had narrowed down pencil-thin to survival, a moment at a time. The Guild had been like a shot of morphine. The pain had vanished. And for Cynthia? Dray didn't know. She'd always assumed that what was important to her was important to her lover also.

Where you go—

Dray's vision blurred. *Synthia stuck around as long as she could. Did we always look in different directions? There's only one thing for me Across the Street, beld bostage by the woman I love. The value of my word.*

What is my word worth? What will the ransom be?

"Dray? Dray? Yo, light-fingers, wake up!"

Dray glanced up from her coffee. Her heart slammed into her ribs when she saw blond hair, concerned blue eyes, and glittering earrings. She yanked her hand from her pocket and swung the Browning up, realizing too late that the face was younger than Cynthia's hard-edged seventeen, and the earrings were gold skulls, not scarabs.

A hand came from the side and clamped around her wrist, forcing the gun down. After a moment Kree pried the weapon from her rigid fingers. He placed it carefully on the table.

"Jesus Christ," Dray whispered, staring into Rebel's pale, wide-eyed face. He looked as scared as she felt. "I'm sorry. I . . ." Biting her lip, she glanced away from the boy. She closed her eyes, shaking, nauseated. She'd almost shot a thirteen-year-old kid.

"If that was a lesson on tagging an armed mark," Rebel said, voice shaky, "then point taken, Dray."

Dray opened her eyes and shook her head. "No. Fuck, no." She stood, relieved that her legs still worked. Across the room, one of the wolves had risen to her feet, her narrowed gaze on Dray. Kree signaled an all-clear. The wolf nodded and sat down again.

Kree touched Dray's wrist. "You okay?"

She jerked away from his hand, knocking over her

mug. It hit the table with a clatter that seemed to echo. Coffee spilled onto the table and the Browning. "I'm fine," she said, face hot. "Forget it." Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to snatch up the pistol and stuff it into her pocket. She shoved aside the bench. "Rebel, I'm sorry." She turned and headed for the door.

"Dray, wait!" Rebel called. "I gotta talk to you."

"Later," she yelled, pulling the door open. "Tomorrow." She stepped out into the damp night air. Dray ran down the stairs and onto the sidewalk, fueled by the image of her gun aimed at Rebel's face. People, lights and sound kaleidoscoped past her like runes tossed from a forecaster's fingers, tumbling through the night.

Muscles cramping, she staggered to a stop blocks later and leaned against the cold iron of a grated store window. She tilted her burning face up to the drizzle just as she heard the sound of boots on concrete, a hand dropped onto her shoulder. She whirled, instincts and adrenaline bringing her fist up and out.

Kree easily dodged her wild blow. Seizing her wrists, he spun her into him and closed his hard-muscled arms around her like a padlock. Too tired to do anything else, Dray rested her cheek against his jacketed chest. She stood there for a time, lost to the warmth of his body, and his smell of leather, musk, and grief not quite dead.

"I wanna help," he said finally.

"I know."

Dray unlocked the door to her room, stepped inside and flipped on the light. The harsh glow sent cockroaches scurrying across the floor. After Kree entered, she closed and relocked the door.

Shrugging out of her jacket, Dray glanced about the cluttered room. Even though Cynthia's stuff was gone, the feel of her remained. Dray tossed her jacket into a chair, glad to be rid of the Browning's dead weight. She stopped beside the rumpled, unmade bed. Images strobed within her mind's eye. Smooth, firm limbs; parted lips poised above an erect nipple; a splash of red hair over pale thighs; a warm tongue; a kiss. Without words, Cynthia whispered into her heart. Dray stroked the sheet's worn folds. Maybe, just maybe, she'd lost something that could never be repeated.

Kree's calloused fingers touched her cheek. Dray lifted her head and met his dark gaze. She didn't want another partner, let alone a lover, especially one who happened to be male. So where was all this leading? How did she or Kree think he could help?

"Kree, look . . . I don't think you being here is such a hot idea."

He hushed her with a finger to her lips. Pushing gently on her shoulders, he sat her on the bed. Kneeling, Kree tugged off her sneakers. Dray stared at him, her palms suddenly sweaty, and wondered at his unworldly behavior. *A partner's behavior.* When he reached for her socks, she slapped his hands away.

"I can do that," she said, pulling them off. She threw them into the corner, where they hit with a wet plop. "Kree, I'm not going to bed with you."

He brushed against her thigh as he reached up and

pulled off her cap. A flood of hair swept into her face and onto her shoulders. She pushed it aside.

"Yeah," he murmured. "You are." He pulled his shotgun from the sling rigged to his back and placed it on the floor beside the bed.

Dray edged away from him. Her hand curled into a fist. "Dammit, I don't think you read..."

Settling onto the bed, he said, "I read right, Dray. You are going to bed with me, but no, we ain't fucking." His smile was as wicked as Synthia's. "Man, you're tense." He gathered her into his arms and laid them both down.

Kree's embrace was chin to head, belly to belly, leg over leg, his hands laced at the small of Dray's back. His braids tickled her face. "Relax, little sister," he whispered into her hair. "Relax." Her muscles unknicked when she realized he was serious about the no sex statement. Although she didn't understand his lack of aggression, she was grateful for it. He risked a lot in treating her with a partner's tenderness. Comfort at the price of renewed pain—for Kree. She listened to the slow thud of his heart.

Settling against him, she said, "I never thought she'd split. The Guild's been good to us. It's been home."

"I hear that," he said, voice low. "Dray, when the time comes, remember this. The Guild ain't no fickle lover. I heard a rumor that Father used to be a social worker, before he got canned during one of the state cutbacks. If that's true, then we were never just a job to him. Man, that's good to know, 'cause we got no one backing us. The State ain't gonna do it. The Fed ain't gonna do it either. We gotta do it ourselves. We gotta believe in each other."

"Were you and your partner lovers?"

He shrugged and the chain around his throat clinked. "Sometimes. When it suited us." One of his hands left her back. He wrapped the chain around his fingers.

Dray took a deep breath, then let it out. "Kree, how did you handle it? When the Keeper gave you the order to ice him?"

Kree tensed and his heartbeat came faster. "I didn't wait for Father's order. When I found out what that bastard was doing... how he got that money he carried around... I knew what to do." He shifted. His hand gripped the padlock he wore, then released it. Gripped again. "Man, those kids counted on him... us."

"Yeah, I know," Dray said, touching his hand, smoothing his fingers open. "You figured that what was important to you was important to him, too." She thought of the alley child and the fox saying, *Welcome home*. "What happened afterwards?"

"I cried. That bastard was my best friend."

But you can't say his name, Dray thought, slipping her fingers through his and squeezing. *That must hurt the worst of all.* The bitter smell of spilled blood returned to her. She tapped their linked hands against the chain. "I still don't read this, Kree."

He swallowed, then sighed. "Duty. Friendship. Sometimes you hafta choose between 'em in order to do what's right. That's really fucked. Whatcha need to remember is that the only hand that can snap the lock shut is your own."

Dray closed her burning eyes. "Is that true for the hand that opens it again, too?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"If I don't kill Synthia, what then?"

Kree's arm tightened around her. "Depends. If she split town, Father doesn't expect you to follow her, read? *But does Synthia?*" But if she's here and you let her slide, then it becomes wolf-duty. And you'd be out."

No longer part of the guild, Dray thought, stomach knotted. No more morphine. And what if Kree were asked to kill Synthia? *I can't do that to him. I can't do that to anyone. She's my responsibility.*

"Just do what you know to be right, little sister," Kree said. His voice was calm, but Dray smelled sweat mingled with desperation. The muscles in his arm spasmed. His body flexed concrete-hard against her and she realized he was trying not to shake. "Choices, shit. Believing you know what's right is the hardest of all. Try to look ahead, see what's coming down the road. What's best for all of us. Meaning you, too."

"Huh? Me?"

"Yeah, you know. You, me, us. The throwaways, the misfits, the crazies. I know we have a voice. I keep dreaming that we find it. I dream we use it. The sound of it is a scream." His voice dropped to a whisper. "I ain't dreamed the end of that scream yet."

Dray swallowed. So Kree was more than a shotgun-toting wolf wrapped in spring-coiled muscles, leather, and ass-kicking boots. He was a dreamer. Hurting, yeah, and chained. But not crippled. He was strong and he still felt. His heart hadn't been stripped bare. Maybe the dreams were why. The image of the forecaster's runes again, dancing metal-bright through her mind, bits of time, slivers of promises. She had a feeling that while Kree was the only one who could unlock the padlock, someone else had to find the key.

"I'm scared, I guess. I don't wanna be alone."

Kree wriggled his fingers loose from Dray's, then combed them through the hair at her temple. "Me too."

As Dray slid into sleep, she wondered if Kree meant he was scared, or didn't want to be alone, or both.

Dray awoke with a start, sweat-soaked and shivering. *That's the last time I sleep with my clothes on.* The air in her room seemed to echo with a sound that had come and gone while she'd slept. Kree was also gone, but not long. The sheets still held a trace of his warmth. Someone hammered at her door. She sat up, wincing when her feet hit the cold floor. "Yeah?" She glanced at the clock beside the bed. Eleven o'clock. Not exactly the crack of dawn, but...

"Dray, it's me, Rebel. You up?"

She felt a little sick remembering her finger curled around the Browning's trigger and his open-mouthed surprise. "That's a stupid question." She climbed out of bed, brushed her damp hair back from her face and answered the door.

He ducked back into the hallway. "You got a gun?"

Dray sighed. Opening the door wider, she said, "Get your ass in here, before I do get my gun."

Rebel sidled inside, grinning. "You scared the shit outta me last night."

Dray closed the door, then leaned against it. "So that's what I smell." She fought the smile tugging at her lips. "You okay, though?"

He flopped onto the bed, propping himself up with his elbows. His grin vanished. "Yeah."

Dray narrowed her gaze. Rebel's pupils were pin-points, and his sneakered feet jittered against the side of the bed. "You're hyped. You can't pick pockets if you're twitching Jesus."

Rebel sat up and crossed his legs under him. His fingers drummed against his knees. He looked down, avoiding her gaze, his shoulders drawn tight. Dray folded her arms over her chest. She chewed on her lower lip. Old habits die hard, she thought. The only problem is living long enough to have old habits. Rebel kept pumping zips and other drugs into his body, hoping to fly from his past at the speed of light. Dray crossed the room, then sat beside the boy. Kree's whispered words came back: *I ain't dreamed the end of that scream yet.* Maybe Rebel would settle for the speed of sound.

"I worry about you," she said. She grasped Rebel's hands. His fingers were cold, his palms damp.

Color touched his cheeks. He shrugged. "I'm okay," he muttered. He looked at her then, his eyes full of pain, dazed. "Just a bad night. Didn't sleep good. No big deal."

"It's a big deal to me," she said, trying to rub warmth into his fingers. "Next time, come over. We can talk away the nightmares. You read me? That's what friends are for."

"I don't need a babysitter. I've been taking care of myself since I was nine." Rebel tugged his hand free and resumed drumming.

And that's what you're running from. "Don't be an asshole, little brother," Dray said. "I need the babysitter. Since Syn split I've been, y'know, kinda lonely."

Blinking, Rebel nodded. Skulls and hoops swung from his carlobes. "Hey, I read you," he said, voice cracking. "That's cool. No problem."

Smiling, Dray slapped his shoulder. "Shit, man, you're making the whole bed shake." She rolled off the bed, then stood. "You can hang out, if you want. I gotta shower and change. Kitchen duty this afternoon."

"I saw Synthia yesterday," Rebel said. "That's what I wanted to tell you, Dray."

Dray stared at him, feeling the color drain from her face. "Where?"

"Across the Street, at a place called Tech Wizardry." Rebel hopped off the bed and stood before Dray, bouncing from one foot to the other. "She works there, I think. I was surprised she was still around. I mean, I always liked Syn and all, but look at what she's put you through and . . ." His speed-bright eyes widened. A crooked smile tilted his lips. "Dray, you gonna shoot me now? You know, messengers and bad news and all."

Despite the ice creeping up her spine and through her guts, Dray managed a smile. "No, but if you keep babbling, I might. Did she say anything?"

"Yeah. She wants to meet me later today. Said she's gonna give me something." Rebel glanced down. He ran

a hand through his wild, spiky hair. "She made me promise not to tell you. Said it would hurt you too much."

And it would *kill* her. Dray cupped Rebel's face with fingers that had gone cold and numb. "Rebel, you broke your promise to her."

His blue eyes met her gaze. His hands clenched shut. He stood very still. What burned behind his eyes was the heart sick rage of an abandoned child. "She broke her promise first. She left us behind. Fuck her."

Dray thought of the little girl in the alley, remembered the feel of Kree's chain. Felt pain as sharp as Rebel's words. Her mother leaving her at the Dari-Mart and handing her a ten-dollar bill. Promising to be back in a bit. *I know we have a voice. The sound of it is a scream.*

Dray dropped her hands from the boy's face and pulled him into a hug. The drugs in Rebel's system seemed to vibrate through him and into her. She ached to do something. To set things right. Breathing in the light perfume of the styling gel in his hair, she asked, "Who else did you tell, kiddo?"

"Kree." His voice was muffled against her shoulder. He held her tight, trembling, bewildered by his own anger.

"It's okay," she murmured. She slid her hands under his jacket and rubbed his T-shirt-covered back. Beneath the knotted muscles she felt the hard curve of his ribs.

"You're gonna do me a favor. You're gonna pull my shift at the Burnside shelter today, okay?"

"Okay." He lifted his head and looked at her. Something besides drugs hazed his eyes. "Where you goin'?"

"Across the Street," she said. "To Tech Wizardry."

WELCOME TO THE ZOO

Enter at your own risk. The City of Portland and the State of Oregon are not responsible for any stolen items, personal injury, or death.

Looking back the way she had come, Dray could imagine those signs hanging over the twilight zone between uptown Portland and the Zoo. Too bad they don't, she thought, turning around and heading up the mica-sparkling sidewalk. Would give the zombies a thrill as they climbed over the trash heaps in their designer rags.

Sunset, Rebel had said. That was when he was supposed to meet Synthia in the alley behind Tech Wizardry. The one question Dray had wanted to ask, but had been afraid to, was *Who gave you the zips?* Synthia had never dealt drugs, but if she was desperate enough to need Rebel, she was desperate enough to bribe him. *I don't think I know her anymore. Don't know if I ever did.*

The Browning, cleaned of coffee and back in her pocket, bumped against her hip. Dray rubbed her hands against her jeans. Still numb. The feeling had disappeared when Rebel had mentioned Synthia's name. Dray walked past men and women in stylish business suits and glittering white smiles posed like mannequins before tall, gleaming buildings or seated at outside tables nibbling tiny colorful meals.

Shit, Dray thought, fighting the urge to run. Where's the rhythm? Where's the flow? She sensed something—chrome-edged and electronic and cold. No one looked right at her, but no one passed too near either. She felt

slithering sideways glances and curious stares behind sunglasses. Brittle laughter sounded behind her.

What the hell does Synthia want from this place?

What happens if Kree shows up? What then? Dray pushed back the thought and hurried her pace. She bit her lip when her hand slid up to her throat to caress the cold links of a padlocked chain she didn't wear.

Synthia stood beside the door marked EMPLOYEES ENTRANCE, her back to Dray. Dray stopped, the calm she'd gathered trickling away like piss down a wino's leg. *Just do what you know to be right, little sister.* Putting her hand in her pocket, she wrapped her fingers around the pistol's grip. *But that ain't easy, is it, Kree?* She leaned against the alley wall, bracing a leg behind her. She found herself listening for the whispers of frightened junkies, then remembered she was Across the Street. *What kinda junkies do they have here?*

"Hey, girlfriend," she said. "Waiting for a hot date?"

Synthia spun around, Kohl-lined eyes wide. Blood-colored light from the setting sun flashed from her earrings. Dray struggled for breath. "Well, shit," Synthia said, a smile ghosting her lips. "The little bastard blabbed. I thought maybe we were still friends."

"You hurt him."

Synthia hugged herself and glanced up at the sky. She nodded. "And you." She looked at Dray. "Don't think that was easy, lady. It was the hardest fucking thing I ever did." She crossed the short distance between them, her face open and looking younger than Rebel's. Hesitantly, she touched Dray's arm. "You could join me, you know. We could go to Seattle or San Francisco—"

Dray shrugged her hand away. Her cheeks burned. "No, we couldn't. I'm Guild-bound. That's why you didn't ask in the first place. You understood that better than I did."

Synthia shook her head and stepped back. "So what now? You gonna kill me, Dray? That's why you're here, right?"

Dray closed her eyes. Something lodged in her throat, aching. *The smell of Kree's pain. The little girl's burned-out gaze, Rebel's clenched fists. The bitter taste of her mother's last kiss.* The creak of leather opened Dray's eyes. Kree slouched against the wall at the alley's end, his thumbs tucked into the belt loops of his leather pants. Silver gleamed at his throat and at his back. Time had run out. The forecaster's runes had hit the scarf.

"Oh, Christ," Synthia whispered, seeing Kree. She backed away from Dray.

Sweat slicked Dray's sides. She grabbed Synthia's arm, fingers twisting into her vinyl jacket. "Remember the Center? Remember what we promised each other?" Swallowing hard, Synthia nodded. "Say it, lady. Now. Quick."

"Where you go I will follow. Dray, what the fuck—" Synthia tugged. Dray tightened her hold. The reek of fear snaked between them like cigarette smoke.

Kree's words in front of Club Le Morte: *We chose. And that beats the shit outta any blood-ties or any before-Guild vows.*

We chose.

"Release me, and I'll release you." Dray shook with the sledgehammer beat of her heart. She breathed deeply, fighting for control. She pulled the Browning halfway from her pocket. Her finger touched the trigger. "Let me go, Syn, please." *I can still say her name, but for how much longer?*

Synthia stared at her, face pale. Then Dray's words sunk in. "I . . . I release you from your vow to me. Your path is your own."

"And I release you of your vow to me and to the Guild," Dray replied, "since I chose and you followed." Leaning forward, Dray kissed Synthia, tasted her for the last time. She tasted cool and bittersweet. When Dray pulled back, tears and Kohl streaked Synthia's cheeks. Dray wondered if the Guild tattoo with its ferret face was still on Synthia's arm or if she'd had it removed yet.

The thing locked around Dray's heart snapped open. Pain spilled through her, sharp and bright and clean. Her breath caught in her throat. *Fuck, this hurts, but it's a hurt I can live with.* "Give me the memory chip you were gonna give Rebel," she said. The steadiness of her voice amazed her.

Synthia fumbled the chip out of her pocket and gave it to her. Dray handed her the Browning. "Even exchange," she said. She turned to look at Kree. He met her gaze, his eyes glittering. Whether with disappointment or understanding, Dray couldn't tell. At least the shotgun was still on his back.

I have your key, wolf-dreamer. Make it work. Your partner murdered whatever vows were between you when he chose to break the Law and your heart. Release him. Release yourself. Use the key.

"I'll tell the Keeper . . . Father . . . that you split town," she said, facing Synthia again.

Synthia shook her head. "But if Father finds out you lied—"

"Then don't make a liar out of me. Go, okay? Just go."

Synthia hugged her. "I love you still," she whispered. Her smell of salt, musk and sweat tugged at Dray's heart. Then she was gone, running down the alley, her sneakers slapping the pavement.

Dray watched her go, dry-eyed, the memory chip clenched in her hand. *Yeah, I guess I love you still, too.* She walked towards Kree. Father would never know as long as Kree kept quiet. If he didn't, she would die when she lost the Guild.

Kree shifted away from the wall and sauntered up beside her. She remembered the soundless echo that had haunted her room that morning. *I know we have a voice.*

"Dray," he said. "How's huntin'?"

"Been better," she replied, throat tight.

Kree nodded. "Kinda quiet. I hear there's a little girl asking for you at the NW 6th Street shelter."

Without looking back, Dray walked from the alley. ♦

Hitmen— See Murderers

Timothy Zahn

It had been a long, slow, frustrating day, full of cranky machines, crankier creditors, and not nearly enough customers. In other words, a depressingly typical day. But even as Radley Grussing slogged up the last flight of stairs to his apartment he found himself whistling a little tune to himself. From the moment he'd passed the first landing—had looked down the first-floor hallway and seen the yellow plastic bag leaning up against each door—he'd known there was hope. Hope for his struggling little print shop; hope for his life, his future, and—with any luck at all—for his chances with Alison. Hope in double-ream lots, wrapped up in a fat yellow bag and delivered to his door.

The new phone books were out.

"Let your fingers do the walking through the Yellow Pages." He sang the old Bell Telephone jingle to himself as he scooped up the bag propped up against his own door and worked the key into the lock. Or, rather, that was what he *tried* to sing. After four flights of stairs, it came out more like, "Let your . . . fingers do the . . . walking through . . . the Yellow . . . Pages."

From off to the side came the sound of a door closing, and with a flush of embarrassment



Illustration by Bob Eggleton

Radley realized that whoever it was had probably overheard his little song. "Shoot," he muttered to himself, his face feeling warm. Though maybe the heat was just from the exertion of climbing four flights of stairs. Alison had been bugging him lately about getting more exercise; maybe she was right.

He got the door open, and for a moment stood on the threshold carefully surveying his apartment. TV and VCR sitting on their woodgrain stand right where they were supposed to be. Check. The doors to kitchen and bedroom standing half-open at exactly the angles he'd put them before he'd left for work that morning. Check.

Through his panting Radley heaved a cautious sigh of relief. The existence of the TV showed no burglars had come and gone; the carefully positioned doors showed no one had come and was still there.

At least, no one *probably* was still there. . . .

As quietly as he could, he stepped into the apartment and closed the door, turning the doorknob lock but leaving the three deadbolts open in case he had to make a quick run for it. On a table beside the door stood an empty pewter vase. He picked it up by its slender neck, left the yellow plastic bag on the floor by the table and tiptoed to the bedroom door. Steeling himself, panting as quietly as was humanly possible, he nudged the door open and peered in. No one. Still on tiptoe, he repeated the check with the kitchen, with the same result.

He gave another sigh of relief. Alison thought he was a little on the paranoid side, and wasn't particularly hesitant about saying so. But he read the papers and he watched the news, and he knew that the quiet evil of the city was nothing to be ignored or scoffed at.

But once more, he'd braved the evil—braved it, and won, and had made it back to his own room and safety. Heading back to the door, he locked the deadbolts, returned the vase to its place on the table, and retrieved the yellow bag.

It was only as he was walking to the kitchen with it, his mind now freed from the preoccupations of survival in a hostile world, that his brain finally registered what his fingers had been trying to tell him all along.

The yellow bag was not, in fact, made of plastic.

"Huh," he said aloud, raising it up in front of his eyes for a closer look. It *looked* like plastic, certainly, like the same plastic they'd been delivering phone books in for he couldn't remember how many years. But the feel of the thing was totally wrong for plastic.

In fact, it was totally wrong for *anything*.

"Well, that's funny," he said, continuing on into the kitchen. Laying the bag on the table, he pulled up one of the four more-or-less-matching chairs and sat down.

For a minute he just looked at the thing, rubbing his fingers slowly across its surface and digging back into his memory for how these bags had felt in the past. He couldn't remember, exactly; but it was for sure they hadn't felt like *this*. This wasn't like any plastic he'd ever felt before. Or like any cloth, or like any paper.

"It's something new, then," he told himself. "Maybe one of those new plastics they're making out of corn oil or something."

The words weren't much comfort. In his mind's eye, he saw the thriller that had been on cable last week, the one where the spy had been blown to bits by a shopping bag made out of plastic explosive. . . .

He gritted his teeth. "That's stupid," he said firmly. "Who in the world would go to that kind of trouble to kill *me*? Period; end of discussion," he added to forestall an argument. Alison had more or less accepted his habit of talking to himself, especially when he hadn't seen her for a couple of days. But even she drew the line at arguing aloud with himself. "End of discussion," he repeated. "So. Let's quit this nonsense and check out the ad."

He took a deep breath, exhaled it explosively like a shotputter about to go into his little loop-de-spin. Taking another deep breath, he reached into the bag and, carefully, pulled the phone book out.

Nothing happened.

"There—you see?" he chided himself, pushing the bag across the table and pulling the directory in front of him. "Alison's right; there's paranoia, and then there's *para-noi-a*. Gotta stop watching those late cable shows. Now, let's see here . . ."

He checked his white-pages listings first, both his apartment's and the print shop's. Both were correct. "Great," he muttered. "And now"—he hummed himself a little trumpet flourish as he turned to the Yellow Pages—"the piece de resistance. Let your fingers do the walking through the Yellow Pages, dum dum de dum . . ." He reached the L's, turned past to the P's . . .

And there it was. Blazing out at him, in full three-color glory, the display ad for Grussing A-One-Excellent Printing And Copying.

"Now *that*," he told himself proudly, "is an *ad*. You just wait, Radley old boy—an ad like that'll get you more business than you know what to do with. You'll see—there's nowhere to go but *up* from now on."

He leafed through the pages, studying all the other print-shop ads and trying hard not to notice that six of his competitors had three-color displays fully as impressive as his own. That didn't matter. His ad—and the business it was going to bring in—would lift him up out of the hungry pack, bring him to the notice of important people with important printing needs. "You'll see," he told himself confidently. The *Printers* heading gave way to *Printers—Business Forms*, and then to *Printing Equipment and Printing Supplies*. "Huh; Steven's has moved," he noted with some surprise. He hadn't bought anything from Steven's for over a year—probably about time he checked out their prices again. Idly, he turned another page—

And stopped. Right after the short listing of *Prosthetic Devices* was a heading he'd never seen before. *Prostitutes*.

"Well, I'll be D-double-darned," he muttered in amazement. "I didn't know they could advertise."

He let his eyes drift down the listings, turned the page. There were a *lot* of names there—almost as many, he thought, as the attorney listings at the other end of the Yellow Pages, except that unlike the lawyers, the prostitutes had no display ads. "Wonder when the

phone company decided to let this go in." He shook his head. "Hoo, boy—the egg's gonna hit the fan for sure when the Baptists see *this*."

He scanned down the listing. Names—both women's and a few men's—addresses, phone numbers—it was all there. Everything anyone so inclined would need to get themselves some late-night companionship.

He frowned. Addresses. Not just post office boxes. Real street addresses.

Home addresses.

"Wait just a minute, here," he muttered. "Just a D-double-damed minute." Nevada, he'd heard once, had legal prostitution; but *here*—"This is nuts," he decided. "The cops could just go right there and arrest them. Couldn't they? I mean, even those escort and massage places usually just have phone numbers. Don't they?"

With the phone book sitting right in front of him, there was an obvious way to answer that question. Sticking a corner of the yellow bag in to mark his place, he turned backwards toward the E's. *Excavating Contractors, Elevators*—oops; too far—

He froze, finger and thumb suddenly stiff where they gripped a corner of the page. A couple of headings down from *Elevators* was another list of names, shorter than the prostitutes listing but likewise distinguished by the absence of display ads. And the heading here . . .

Embezzlers.

His lips, he suddenly noticed, were dry. He licked them, without noticeable effect. "This," he said, his words sounding eerie in his ears, "is nuts. Embezzlers don't advertise. I mean, come on now."

He willed the listing to vanish, to change to something more reasonable, like *Embalmers*. But that heading was there, too . . . and the *Embezzlers* heading didn't go away.

He took a deep breath and, resolutely, turned the page. "I've been working too hard," he informed himself loudly. "Way too hard. Now. Let's see, where was I going . . . right—escort services."

He found the heading and its page after page of garish and seductive display ads. Sure enough, none of them listed any addresses. Just for completeness, he flipped back to the M's, checking out the massage places. Some had addresses; others—the ones advertising out-calls only—had just phone numbers.

"Makes sense," he decided. "Otherwise the cops and self-appointed guardians of public morals could just sit there and scare all their business away. So what gives with *this*?" He started to turn back to the prostitute listing, his fingers losing their grip on the slippery pages and dropping the book open at the end of the M's—

And again he froze. There was another listing of names and addresses there, just in front of *Museums*. Shorter than either the prostitute or embezzler lists; but the heading more than made up for it.

Murderers.

He squeezed his eyes shut, shook his head. "This is crazy," he breathed. "I mean, *really* crazy." Carefully, he opened his eyes again. The *Murderers* listing was still there. Almost unwillingly, he reached up a finger and

rubbed it across the ink. It didn't rub off, like cheap ink would, or fade away, like a hallucination ought to.

It was real.

He was still staring at the book, the sea of yellow dazzling his eyes, when the knock came at his front door.

He fairly jumped out of the chair, jamming his thigh against the underside of the table as he did so. "It's the FBI," he gasped under his breath. It was their book—their book of the city's criminals. It had been delivered here by mistake, and they were here to get it back.

Or else it was the *mob's* book—

"Radley?" A familiar voice came through the steel-cored wood panel. "You home?"

He felt a little surge of relief, knees going a little shaky. "There's paranoia," he chided himself, "and then there's *para-noi-a*." He raised his voice. "Coming, Alison," he called.

"Hi," she said with a smile as he opened the door, her face just visible over the large white bag in her arms. "Got the table all set?"

"Oh—right," he said, taking the bag from her. The warm scent of fried chicken rose from it; belatedly, he remembered he was supposed to have made a salad, too. "Uh—no, not yet. Hey, look, come in here—you've got to *see* this."

He led her to the kitchen, dropping the bag on the counter beside the sink and sitting her down in front of the phone book. The yellow bag still marked the page with the *Prostitutes* heading; turning there, he pointed. "Do you see what I see?" he asked, his mouth going dry. If she *didn't* see anything, it had suddenly occurred to him, it would mean his brain was in serious trouble. . . .

"Huh," she said. "Well, *that's* new. I thought prostitution was still illegal."

"Far as I know, it still is," he agreed, feeling another little surge of relief. So he wasn't going nuts. Or at least he wasn't going nuts alone. "Hang on, though—it gets worse."

She sat there silently as he flipped back to the *Embezzlers* section, and then forward again to point out the *Murderers* heading. "I don't know what else is here," he told her. "This is as far as I got."

She looked up, an odd expression on her face. "You *do* realize, I hope, that this is nothing but an overly elaborate practical joke. This stuff can't really be in a real phone book."

"Well . . . sure," he floundered. "I mean, I know that the phone company wouldn't—"

She was still giving him that look. "Radley," she said warningly. "Come on, now, let's not slide off reality into the cable end of the channel selector. No one makes lists of prostitutes and embezzlers and murderers. And even if someone did, they *certainly* wouldn't try to hide them inside a city directory."

"Yes, I know, Alison. But—well, look here." He pulled the yellow bag over and slid it into her hand. "Feel it. Does it feel like plastic to you? Or like anything else you've ever touched?"

Alison shrugged. "They make thousands of different kinds of plastics these days—"

"All right then, look here." He cut her off, lifting up the end of the phone book. "Here—at the binding. I'm a printer—I *know* how binding is done. These pages haven't just been slipped in somehow—they were bound in at the same time as all the others. How would someone have done *that*?"

"It's a joke, Radley," Alison insisted. "It has to be. All the phone books can't have—Well, look, it's easy enough to check. Let me go downstairs and get mine while you get the salad going."

Her apartment was just two floors down, and he'd barely gotten the vegetables out of the fridge and lined them up on the counter by the time she'd returned. "Okay, here we go," she said, sitting down at the table again and opening her copy of the phone book. "Prostitutes . . . nope, not here. Embezzlers . . . nope. Murderers . . . still nope." She offered it to him.

He took it and gave it a quick inspection of his own. She was right; none of the strange headings seemed to be there. "But how could anyone have gotten the extra pages bound in?" he demanded putting it down and gesturing to his copy. "I mean, all you have to do is just look at the binding."

"I know." Alison shook her head, running a finger thoughtfully across the lower edge of the binding. "Well . . . I *said* it was overly elaborate. Maybe someone who knows you works where they print these things, and he got hold of the orig—oh, my *God*!"

Radley jumped a foot backwards, about half the distance Alison and her chair traveled. "What?" he snapped, eyes darting all around.

She was panting, her breath coming in short, hyperventilating gasps. "The . . . the page. The listing . . ."

Radley dropped his eyes to the phone book. Nothing looked any different. "What? What'd you see?"

"The murderer listing," she whispered. "I was looking at it and . . . and it got longer."

He stared at the page, a cold hand working its way down his windpipe. "What do you mean, it got longer?" he asked carefully. "You mean like someone . . . just got added to the list?"

Alison didn't answer. Radley broke his gaze away from the page and looked at her. Her face was white, her breath coming slower but starting to shake now, her eyes wide on the book. "Alison?" he asked. "You okay?"

"It's from the devil," she hissed. Her right hand, gripping the table white-knuckled, suddenly let go its grip, darting up to trace a quick cross across her chest.

"You've got to destroy it, Radley," she said. Abruptly, she looked up at him. "Right now. You've got to—she twisted her head, looking all around the room—"you've got to burn it," she said, jabbing a finger toward the tiny fireplace in the living room. "Right now; right there in the fireplace." She turned back to the phone book, and with just a slight hesitation scooped it up. "Come on—"

"Wait a minute, Alison, wait a minute," Radley said, grabbing her hands and forcing them and the phone book back down onto the table. "Let's not do anything rash, huh? I mean—"

"Anything *rash*? This thing is a tool of the *devil*."

"That's what I mean," he said. "Going off half-cocked. Who says this is from the devil? Who says—"

"Who says it's from the *devil*?" She stared at him, wide-eyed. "Radley, just where do you think this thing came from, the phone company?"

"So who says it didn't come from the other direction?" Radley countered. "Maybe it was given to me by an angel—ever think of *that*?"

"Oh, sure," Alison snorted. "Right. An angel left you this—this—voyeur's delight."

Radley frowned at her. "What in the world are you talking about? These people are *criminals*, Alison. They've given up their right of privacy."

"Since when?" she shot back. "No one gives up any of their rights until they're convicted."

"But—" he floundered.

"And anyway," she added, "who says any of these people really are murderers?"

Radley looked down at the book. "But if they're not, why are they listed here?"

"Will you listen to yourself?" Alison demanded. "Five minutes ago you were wondering how this thing could exist; now you're treating what it says like it was gospel. You have no proof that any of these people have ever committed *any* crime, let alone killed anyone. For all you know, this whole thing could be nothing more than some devil's scheme to make you even more paranoid than you are already."

"I am *not* paranoid," Radley growled. "This city's dangerous—any big city is. That's not paranoia, it's just plain, simple truth." He pointed at the book. "All this does is confirm what the TV and papers already say."

For a long moment Alison just stared at him, her expression a mixture of anger and fear. "All right, Radley," she said at last. "I'll meet you halfway. Let's put it to the test. If there really was a murder tonight at"—she looked up at the kitchen wall clock—"about six-twenty, then it ought to be on the eleven o'clock news. Right?"

Radley considered. "Well . . . sometimes murders don't get noticed for a while. But, yeah, probably it'll be on tonight."

"All right," Alison took a deep breath. "If there *was* a murder, I'll concede that maybe there's something to all of this." She locked eyes with him. "But if there *wasn't* any murder . . . will you agree to burn the book?"

Radley swallowed. The possibilities were only just starting to occur to him, but already he'd seen enough to recognize the potential of this thing. The potential for criminal justice, for public service—

"Radley?" Alison prompted.

He looked at her, gritted his teeth. "We'll check the news," he told her. "But if the murder isn't there, we're not going to burn anything until tomorrow night, after we have a chance to check the papers."

Alison hesitated, then nodded. Reluctantly, Radley thought. "All right." Standing up, she picked up the book, closed it with her thumb marking the place. "You finish the salad. I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

"Where are you going?" Radley frowned, his eyes on the book as she tucked it under her arm.

"Down to the grocery on the corner—they've got a copy machine over by the ice chest."

"What do you need to copy it for?" Radley asked. "If the police release a suspect's name, we can just look it up—"

"We already know the book can change."

"Oh . . . Right."

He stood there, irresolute, as she headed for the door. Then, abruptly, the paralysis vanished, and in five quick strides he caught up with her. "I'll come with you," he said, gently but firmly taking the book from her hands. "The salad can wait."

It took several minutes, and a lot of quarters, for them to find out that the book wouldn't copy.

Not on any light/dark setting. Not on any reduction or enlargement setting. Not the white pages, not the Community Service pages, not the Yellow Pages, not the covers.

Not at all.

They returned to the apartment. The chicken was by now stone-cold, so while Radley threw together a passable salad, Alison ran the chicken, mashed potatoes, and gravy through the microwave. By unspoken but mutual consent they didn't mention the book during dinner.

Nor did they talk about it afterwards as they cleaned up the dishes and played a few hands of gin rummy. At eight, when prime time rolled around, they sat together on Radley's old couch and watched TV.

Radley wouldn't remember afterwards much about what they'd watched. Part of him waited eagerly for the show to be broken into by the announcement of what he was beginning to regard as "his" murder. The rest of him was preoccupied with Alison, and the abnormal way she sat beside him the whole time. Not snuggled up against him like she usually was when they watched TV, but sitting straight and stiff and not quite touching him.

Maybe, he thought, she was waiting for the show to be broken into, too.

But it wasn't, and the 'tween-show local newscast didn't mention any murders, and by the time the eleven o'clock news came on Radley had almost begun to give up.

The lead story was about an international plane crash. The second story was his murder.

"Authorities are looking for this man for questioning in connection with the crime," the well-scrubbed newswoman with the intense eyes said as the film of the murder scene was replaced by a mug shot of a thin, mean-looking man. "Marvin Lake worked at the same firm with the victim before he was fired last week, and had threatened Mr. Cordler several times in the past few months. Police are asking anyone with information about his whereabouts to contact them."

The picture shifted again, and her co-anchor took over with a story about a looming transit strike. Bracing himself, Radley turned to Alison.

To find her already gazing at him, her eyes looking haunted. "I suppose," he said, "we'd better go check the book."

She didn't reply. Getting up, Radley went into the kitchen and returned with the phone book. He had marked the *Murderers* listing with the yellow non-plastic bag. . . . "He's here," Radley said, his voice sounding distant in his ears. "Marvin Lake." He leaned over to offer Alison a look.

She shrank back from the book. "I don't want to see it," she said, her voice as tight as her face.

Radley sighed, eyes searching out the entry again. Address, phone number . . .

"Wait a minute," he muttered to himself, flipping back to the white pages. L, La, Lak . . . there it was: Marvin Lake. Address . . . "It's not the same address," he said, feeling an odd excitement seeping through the sense of unreality. "Not even close."

"So?" Alison said.

"Well, don't you see?" he asked, looking up at her. "The white pages must be his home address; *this* one"—he jabbed at the Yellow Pages listing—"must be where he is right now."

Alison looked at him. "Radley . . . if you're thinking what I think you're thinking . . . please don't."

"Why not?" he demanded. "The guy's a murderer."

"That hasn't been proved yet."

"The police think he's guilty."

"That's not what the report said," she insisted. "All they said was that they wanted to question him."

"Then why is he *here*?" Radley held out the open phone book.

"Maybe because you *want* him to be there," Alison shot back. "You ever think of *that*? Maybe that thing is just somehow creating the listings you want to see there."

Radley glared at her. "Well, there's one way to find out, isn't there?"

"Radley—"

Turning his back on her, he stepped back into the kitchen, turning to the front of the phone book. The police non-emergency number . . . there it was. Picking up the phone, he punched in the digits.

The voice answered on the seventh ring. "Police."

"Ah—yes, I just heard the news about the Cordler murder," Radley said, feeling suddenly tongue-tied. "I think I may have an idea where Marvin Lake is."

"One moment."

The phone went dead, and Radley took a deep breath. Several deep breaths, in fact, before the phone clicked again. "This is Detective Abrams," a new voice said. "Can I help you?"

"Ah—yes, sir. I think I know where Marvin Lake is."

"And that is . . . ?"

"Uh—" Radley flipped back to where his thumb marked the place. A sudden fear twisted his stomach, that the whole *Murderers* listing might have simply vanished, leaving him looking like a fool.

But it hadn't. "Forty-seven thirty West Fifty-second," he said, reading off the address.

"Uh-huh," Abrams grunted. "Would you mind telling me your name?"

"Ah—I'd rather not. I don't really want any of the spotlight."

"Yeah," Abrams said. "Did you actually see Lake at this address?"

This was starting to get awkward. "No, I didn't," Radley said, searching desperately for something that would sound convincing. "But I heard it from a—well, a pretty reliable source," he ended lamely.

"Yeah," Abrams said again. He didn't sound especially convinced. "Thanks for the information."

"You're—" The phone clicked again. "Welcome," Radley finished with a sigh. Hanging up, he closed the phone book onto his thumb again and turned back to face Alison.

She was still sitting on the couch, staring at him over the back. "Well?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe they won't bother to check it out."

She stared into his face a moment longer. Then, dropping her gaze, she got to her feet. "It's getting late," she said over her shoulder as she started for the door. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

He took a step toward her. "Alison—"

"Good night, Radley," she called, undoing the locks. A minute later, she was gone.

For a long moment he just stood there, staring at the door, an unpleasant mixture of conflicting emotions swirling through his brain and stomach. "Come on, Alison," he said quietly to the empty room. "If this works, think of what it'll mean for cleaning up this city."

The empty room didn't answer. Sighing, he walked to the door and refastened the deadbolts. She was right, after all; it *was* late, and he needed to be at work by seven.

He looked down at the phone book still clutched in his hands. On the other hand, Pete would be in by seven, too, and it didn't hardly take two of them to get the place ready for business.

And he really ought to take the time to sit down with the book and find out just exactly what this miracle was that had been dropped on his doorstep.

It was nearly one-thirty before he went to bed . . . but by the time he did, he'd made lists of every murderer, arsonist, and rapist in the book.

The next time one of those listings changed, he wouldn't have to wait for the news reports to find out who was guilty.

He got to the shop just before the seven-thirty opening time, feeling groggy but strangely exhilarated.

"Morning, Mr. Grussing," Pete Barnabee nodded solemnly from up at the counter as Radley closed the back door behind him. "How you doing?"

"I'm fine, Pete," Radley told him. "Yourself?"

"Pretty tolerable, thank you."

It was the same set of greetings, with only minor variations, that they'd exchanged every morning since Radley had first hired Pete two months ago. "So. The place ready for business?" he asked the other.

"All set," Pete confirmed. "You seen the new phone book yet?"

"Yeah—mine came yesterday," Radley nodded, resisting the urge to tell Pete about the strange Yellow Pages

that had come with his. "The new ad looks pretty good, doesn't it?"

"Best of the bunch," Pete said. "Oughta bring in whole stacks of new business."

"Let's hope so." Radley looked at his watch. "Well, time to let the crowds in," he said, walking around the counter and unlocking the front door. "Incidentally, you didn't happen to catch any news this morning, did you?" he added as he turned the "Closed" sign around.

"Yeah, I did," Pete answered. "They didn't mention our ad, though."

"Very funny. I was just wondering if the cops found that guy they were looking for in the Cordler murder."

"Oh, yeah, they did," Pete nodded. "Marvin Lake or something, right? Yeah, they found him holed up somewhere on West Fifty-second last night."

Radley felt a tight smile crease his cheeks. "Did they, now?" he murmured, half to himself. "Well, well, *well*."

Pete cocked an eyebrow at him. "You know the guy?"

"Me? No. Why do you ask?"

Pete shrugged. "I dunno. You just seem . . ." He shrugged again.

Again, Radley was tempted. But he really didn't know Pete well enough to trust him with a secret like this.

"I'm just happy that scum like that is off the street," he said instead. "That's all."

"Oh, he's still on the street," Pete said, squatting down to fuss with the loading tray on one of the presses. "Made bail and walked right out."

Radley made a face. That figured. The stupid leaky criminal justice system. "They'll get him again."

"Maybe. Maybe not. You don't get many volunteer stoolies after the first one bites it."

Radley stared at him, his throat tightening. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, it's just that an hour after Lake walked out of the police station the guy who lent him that apartment turned up dead. Shot twice in the face." Pete straightened up, brushed off his hands briskly. "Ready for me to start on the Hammerstein job?"

Somehow, Radley made it through the morning. At lunchtime he rushed home.

"Detective Abrams," he told the person who answered the phone. "Tell him it's the guy who gave him Marvin Lake's address last night."

"One moment." The line went on hold.

Wedge the phone between shoulder and ear, Radley hauled the phone book onto the table and opened it to the Yellow Pages. The M's . . . there. Mo, Mu—

"This is Abrams." The other man sounded tired.

"This is Ra—the guy who told you where Marvin Lake was last night," Radley said. He had the *Murderers* listing now. Running a finger down it . . .

"Yeah, I recognize the voice," Abrams grunted. "You know where he's gone?"

Radley opened his mouth . . . and froze.

The Marvin Lake listing was gone.

"You still there?" Abrams prompted.

"Uh . . . yeah. Yeah. Uh . . ." Frantically, Radley

scanned the listing, wondering if he'd somehow been looking at the wrong place. But the name wasn't under the L's, or under the M's, or anywhere else.

It was just gone.

"Look, you got something to say or don't you?"

Abrams growled. "If you do, spit it out. If you don't, quit wasting everyone's time and get off the phone, okay?"

"I'm . . . sorry," Radley managed, staring at the spot where the Marvin Lake listing should have been. "I thought—well, I'm sorry, that's all."

"Yeah. We're all sorry for something," Abrams sounded slightly disgusted. "Next time just write me a postcard, okay?" Without waiting for an answer, he hung up.

Blindly, Radley groped for the hook and hung up the handset, his eyes still on the page. "This," he announced to himself, "is crazy. It's *crazy*. How can it be here one day and gone the—"

And right in mid-sentence, it hit him. "Oh, real smart, Radley," he muttered. "What are you using for brains, anyway, oatmeal? Of *course* Marvin Lake's not here anymore—if *he* had any brains he'll have left town hours ago. And soon as he leaves town . . ."

He sighed and closed the book, the all-too familiar tastes of embarrassment and frustration souring his mouth. "Doesn't matter," he told himself firmly. "Okay. So this one got away. Fine. But the next one won't. There's still gotta be a way to use this thing. All you have to do is find it."

He returned to the shop and got back to work.

If the new display ad had helped at all, it wasn't obvious from the business load. For Radley the day turned out to be an offset copy of the previous one, with the added secret frustration of knowing that a double murderer had slipped through his fingers.

And then he got home, to find Alison waiting for him.

"Did you see this?" she asked when they were safe behind the triple-locked door. The article the newspaper was folded to . . .

"I heard about it, yeah," he said. "Tried to call in Marvin Lake's new address to the police on my lunch hour, but the listing's gone. Best guess is he skipped town."

"So it didn't really do any good, did it?"

"It did a lot of good," he countered. "It showed that what the book says is true."

"Not really. We still don't *know* that Marvin Lake killed anybody."

"We don't? What about that guy?" He jabbed a finger at her newspaper. "If he didn't kill Cordler, why would he kill the guy who hid him from the cops?"

"We don't know he did *that*, either," she retorted.

"Face it, Radley—all you have there is hearsay. And not very good hearsay, either."

"It's good enough for me," he said doggedly. "Half the time people get away with crimes because the police don't know who to concentrate their investigations on. Well, this is just what we need to change that."

"And all thanks to Radley Grussing, Super Stoolie."

"Sneer all you like," Radley growled. "This is *truth*, Alison—you know it as well as I do."

"It's not truth," she snapped back. "It may be *true*, but it's not *truth*."

"Oh, well, *that* makes sense," he said, with more sarcasm than he'd really intended. "I can hardly wait to hear what the difference is."

She sighed, all the tension seeming to drain out of her. "I don't know," she said, her voice sounding suddenly tired. "All I know is that that book is wrong. Somehow, it's *wrong*." She took a deep breath. "This isn't good for you, Radley. Isn't good for us. People like you and me weren't meant to know things like this. Please, *please* destroy it."

He looked at her . . . and slowly it dawned on him that his whole relationship with Alison was squatting square on the line here. "Alison, I can't just throw this away," he said gently. "Can't you see what we've got here? We've got the chance to clean away some of the filth that's clogging the streets of this city."

"And to fluff up Radley Grussing's ego in the process?"

He winced. "That's not fair," he said stiffly. "I'm not trying to make a name for myself here."

"But you like the power," She stared him straight in the eye. "Admit it, Radley—you *like* knowing these people's darkest secrets."

Radley clenched his teeth. "I don't think this discussion is getting us anywhere." He turned away.

"Will you destroy the book?" she asked bluntly from behind him.

He couldn't face her. "I can't," he said over his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Alison . . . but I just *can't*."

For a long moment she was silent. Then, without a word, she moved away from him, and he turned back around in time to see her collect her purse and jacket from the couch and head for the door. "Let me walk you downstairs," Radley called after her as she unlocked the deadbolts.

"I don't think I'll get lost," she said shortly.

"Yes, but—" He stopped.

She frowned over her shoulder at him. "But *what*?"

"I just thought that . . . I mean, there are a lot of rapists running loose in this city. . . ."

She gazed at him, something like pain or pity or fear in her eyes. "You see?" she said softly. "It's started already." Opening the door, she left.

Radley exhaled noisily between his teeth. "Nothing's started," he told the closed door. "I'm just being cautious. That's hardly a crime."

The words sounded hollow in his ears, and for a minute he just stood there, wondering if maybe she was right. "No," he told himself firmly. "I can handle this. I *can*."

Turning back to the kitchen, he pulled a frozen dinner out of the refrigerator and popped it into the microwave. Then, pulling a notebook from the phone shelf, he flipped it open and got out a pen. Time to compare the Book's listings of murderers, arsonists, and rapists against the lists he'd made last night. See who, if anyone, had sold their souls to the devil in the past fourteen hours.

According to the papers, there had been two gang killings in the city that day, both of them drive-by shoot-

ings. Both apparently by repeaters, unfortunately, because no new names had appeared in the *Murderers* listing. The *Arsonists* listing hadn't changed since last night, either.

On the *Rapists* list, though, he hit paydirt.

The phone rang six times. Then: "Hello?"

A woman's voice. Radley gripped the phone a little tighter. He'd hoped the man lived alone. "James Whittington, please," he said.

"May I ask who's calling?"

A secretary, then, not a wife? A thin straw, but Radley found himself clutching it hard. "Tell him I'd like to discuss this afternoon's activities with him," he instructed her. "He'll understand."

There was a short silence. "Just a minute."

Then came the sound of a hand covering the mouthpiece, and a brief and heavily muffled conversation. A moment later, the hand was removed. Radley waited, and after nearly ten seconds a man's voice came on. "Hello?"

"Is this James Whittington?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"Someone who knows what you did this afternoon," Radley told him. "You raped a woman."

There was just the briefest pause. "If this is supposed to be a joke, it's not especially funny."

"It's no joke," Radley said, letting his voice harden.

"You know it and I know it, so let's cut the innocent act."

"Oh, the tough type, huh?" Whittington sneered.

"Making anonymous calls and vague accusations—that's real tough. I don't suppose you've got anything more concrete. A name, for instance?"

"I don't know her name," Radley admitted, feeling sweat beading up on his forehead. This wasn't going at all the way he'd expected. "But I'm sure the police won't have too much trouble rooting out little details like that."

"I have no idea what the hell you're talking about," Whittington growled.

"No?" Radley asked. "Then why are you still listening?"

"Why are you still talking?" Whittington countered.

"You think you can shake me down or something?"

"I don't want any money," Radley said, feeling like a blue-ribbon idiot. Somehow, he'd thought that a flat-out accusation like this would make Whittington crumble and blurt out a confession. He should have just called the police in the first place. "I just wanted to talk to you," he added uncomfortably. "I suppose I wanted to see what kind of man would rape a woman—"

"I didn't rape anyone."

"Yeah. Right. I guess there's nothing to do now but just go ahead and tell the cops what I know. Sorry to have ruined your evening." He started to hang up.

"Wait a second," Whittington's voice came faintly from the receiver.

Radley hesitated, then put the handset back to his ear. "What?"

There was a long, painful pause. "Look," the other man said at last. "I don't know what she told you, but it wasn't rape. I Hell, she was the one who hit on me. What was I supposed to do, turn her down?"

Radley frowned, a sudden surge of misgiving churning through his stomach. Could the Book have been wrong? He opened his mouth—

"Damn you."

He jumped. It was a woman's voice—the same voice that had originally answered the phone. Listening in on an extension.

Whittington swore under his breath. "Mave, get the hell off the phone."

"No!" the woman said, her voice suddenly hard and ugly. "No. Enough is enough—damn it all, can't you even drive to the airport and back without screwing someone? Oh, God . . . Traci?"

"Mave, shut the hell up!"

"Your own niece?" the woman snarled. "God, you make me sick."

"I said *shut up!*" Whittington snarled back. "She hit on me, damn it!"

"She's sixteen years old!" the woman screamed. "What the hell does she know about bastards like you?"

Radley didn't wait to hear any more. Quickly, quietly, he hung up on the rage boiling out of his phone.

For a minute he just sat there at his table, his whole body shaking with reaction. Then, almost reluctantly, he reached for the Book, still open to the *Rapists* listings, and turned to the end. And sure enough, there it was:

Rapists, Statutory—See Rapists.

Slowly, he closed the Book. "It was still a crime," he reminded himself. "Even if she really *did* consent. It was still a crime."

But not nearly the crime he'd thought it was.

He took a deep breath, exhaled it slowly. The tight sensation in his chest refused to go away. A marriage obviously on the brink, one that probably would have gone over the edge eventually anyway. But if his call hadn't given it this particular push . . .

He swallowed hard, staring at the Book. The solitude of his apartment suddenly had become loneliness. "I wish Alison was here," he murmured. He reached for the phone—

And stopped. Because when she'd finished sympathizing with him, she would once again tell him to burn the Book.

"I can't do that," he told himself firmly. "She can play with words all she wants to. The stuff in the Book is *true*; and if it's true then it's *truth*. Period."

A flicker of righteousness briefly colored his thoughts. But it faded quickly, and when it was gone, the loneliness was still there.

He sat there for a long time, staring at nothing in particular. Then, with another sigh, he hitched his chair closer to the kitchen table and pulled the Book and notebook over to him. There were a lot of criminals whose names he hadn't yet copied down. With the whole evening now stretching out before him, he ought to be able to make a sizeable dent in that number before bedtime.

He arrived at the shop a few minutes before eight the next morning, his eyelids heavy with too little sleep and

too many nightmares. Never before had he realized just how many types of crime there were in the world. Nor had he realized how many people were out there committing them.

Business was noticeably better than it had been the previous few weeks, but Radley hardly noticed. With the evil of the city roiling in his mind's eye like a huge black thundercloud, the petty details of printing letterhead paper and business cards seemed absurdly unimportant. And again he had to drag his thoughts away from the blackness of the thundercloud back to what he was doing—more often than not, finding a bemused-looking customer standing there peering at him.

Fortunately, most of them accepted his excuse that he hadn't been sleeping well lately. Even more fortunately, Pete knew his way around well enough to take up the slack.

Partly from guilt, partly because he wanted to give his full attention over to the Book when he went home, Radley stayed for an hour after the shop closed, getting some of the next day's work set up. By the time he left, rush hour was over, leaving the streets and sidewalks about as empty as they ever got.

It was a quiet walk home. Quiet, but hardly peaceful. Perhaps it was merely the relative lack of traffic, the fact that Radley wasn't used to walking down these streets without having to change his direction every five steps to avoid another person. Or perhaps it was merely his own fatigue, magnifying the caution he'd always felt about life here.

Or perhaps Alison had been right. Perhaps it *was* the Book that was bothering him. The Book, and the page after page of *Muggers* he'd leafed through that first night. . . .

It was an unnerving experience, and by the time he reached his building he was seriously considering whether to start carrying a gun to work with him. But as soon as he left the public sidewalk, the sense of imminent danger began to lift; and by the time he was safely behind his deadbolts he could almost laugh at how strongly a runaway imagination could make him feel.

Still, he waited until he'd finished dinner and had a beer in his hand before hauling out the Book, the newspaper, and his notebook and beginning the evening's perusal.

There had been two more murders—again, apparently by repeaters, since there were no new names under the appropriate listing in the Book. Ditto with rapists and armed robbers. The *Muggers* listing had increased by eleven names, but after wasting half an hour comparing lists it finally dawned on him that isolating the new names wouldn't do anything to let him link a particular person to a particular crime. The *Burglars* listing, increased by three, presented the same problem.

"Growing like a weed," he muttered to himself, flipping back and forth through the Book. "Just like a weed. How in blazes are we ever going to stop it?"

It was nearly nine o'clock when he finally went back to the *Embezzlers* listing . . . and found what he was looking for.

A single new name.

And what was more, a name Radley couldn't find mentioned anywhere in the newspaper. Which made sense; a crime like embezzlement could go unnoticed for weeks or even months.

Radley had tried informing on a murderer, and had wound up making matters worse. He'd tried wangling information out of a rapist, with similar results.

Perhaps he could become a conscience.

The phone was picked up on the third ring. "Hello?" a cool, MBA-type voice answered.

"Harry Farandell, please," Radley said.

"Speaking," the other man acknowledged. "Who's this?"

"Someone who wants to help you get off the path you're on before it's too late," Radley told him. "You see, I know that you embezzled some money today."

There was a long silence. "I don't know what you're talking about," Farandell said at last.

Almost the same words, Radley remembered, that James Whittington had used in denying his rape. "I'm not a policeman, Mr. Farandell," Radley told him. "I'm not with your company, either. I could call both of them, of course, but I'd really rather not."

"Oh, I'm sure," Farandell responded bitterly. "And how much, may I ask, is all this altruism going to cost me?"

"Nothing at all," Radley assured him. "I don't want any of the money you stole. I want you to put it back."

"What?"

"You heard me. Chances are no one knows yet what you've done. You replace the money now and no one ever will."

Another long silence. "I can't," Farandell said at last.

"Why not? You already spent it or something?"

"You don't understand," Farandell sighed.

"Look, do you still have the money, or don't you?" Radley asked.

"Yes. Yes, I've still got it. But—look, we can work something out. I'll make a deal with you; any deal you want."

"No deals, Mr. Farandell," Radley said firmly. "I'm trying to stop crime, not add to it. Return the money, or else I go to the police. You've got forty-eight hours to decide which it'll be."

He hung up. For a moment he wondered if he should have given Farandell such a lenient deadline. If the guy skipped town . . . but no. It wasn't like he was facing a murder charge or something equally serious. And anyway, it could easily take a day or two for him to slip the money back without anyone noticing.

And when he had done so, it would be as if the crime had never happened.

"You see?" Radley told himself as he turned to a fresh page in the notebook. "There *is* a way to use this. Tool of the devil, my foot."

The warm feeling lasted the rest of the evening, even through the writer's cramp he got from tallying yet more names in his notebook. It lasted, in fact, until the next morning.

When the TV news announced that financier Harry Farandell had committed suicide.

Business was even better that day than it had been the day before. But again Radley hardly noticed. He worked mechanically, letting Pete take most of the load, coming out of his own dark thoughts only to listen to the periodic updates on the Farandell suicide that the radio newscasts sprinkled through the day. By late afternoon it was apparent that Farandell's financial empire, far from being in serious trouble, had merely had a short-term cash-flow problem. In such cases, the commentators said, the standard practice was to take funds from a healthy institution to prop up the ailing one. Such transfers, though decidedly illegal, were seldom caught by the regulators, and the commentators couldn't understand why Farandell hadn't simply done that instead.

Twice during the long day Radley almost picked up the phone to call Alison. But both times he put the handset down undialed. He knew, after all, what she would say.

He made sure to leave on time that evening, to get home during rush hour when there were lots of people on the streets. All the way up the stairs he swore he would leave the Book where it was for the rest of the night, and for the first hour he held firmly to that resolution. But with dinner eaten, the dishes washed, and the newspaper read, the evening seemed to stretch out endlessly before him.

Besides, there had been another murder in the city. Taking a quick look at his list wouldn't hurt.

There were no new names on the listing, which meant either that the murderer was again a repeater or else that he'd already left town. The paper had also reported a mysterious fire over on the east side that the police suspected was arson; but the *Arsonists* listing was also no longer than it had been the night before.

"You ought to close it now," he told himself. But even as he agreed that he ought to, he found himself leafing through the pages. All the various crimes; all the ways people had found throughout the ages of inflicting pain and suffering on each other. He'd spent he didn't know how many hours looking through the Book and writing down names, and yet he could see that he'd hardly scratched the surface. The city was dying, being eaten away from beneath by its own inhabitants.

He'd reached the T's now, and the eight pages under the *Thieves* heading. Compared to some of the others in the Book it was a fairly minor crime, and he'd never gotten around to making a list of the names there. "And even if I did," he reminded himself, "it wouldn't do any good. I bet we get twenty new thieves every day around here." He started to turn the page, eyes glancing idly across the listings—

And stopped. There, at the top of the second column, was a very familiar name. A familiar name, with a familiar address and phone number accompanying it.

Pete Barnabee.

Radley stared at it, heart thudding in his chest. No. No, it couldn't be. Not Pete. Not the man—

Whom he'd hired only a couple of months ago. Without really knowing all that much about him . . .

"No wonder we've been losing money," he murmured to himself. Abruptly, he got to his feet. "Wait a minute," he cautioned himself even as he grabbed for his coat. "Don't jump to any conclusions here, all right? Maybe he stole something from someone else, a long time ago."

"Fine," he answered tartly, unlocking the deadbolts with quick flicks of his wrist. "Maybe he did. There's still only one way to find out for sure."

There were more people on the streets now than there had been on his walk through the dinnertime calm the night before: people coming home from early-evening entertainment or just heading out for later-night versions. Radley hardly noticed them as he strode back to the print shop, running the inventory lists through his mind as best he could while he walked. There were any number of small items—pens and paper and such—that he wouldn't particularly miss even if Pete had been pilfering them ever since starting work there. Unfortunately, there were also some very expensive tools and machines that he could ill afford to lose.

And he'd already discovered that *Thieves*, *Petty* and *Thieves*, *Grand* were both included under the *Thieves* heading.

He reached the shop and let himself in the back door. The first part of the check was easy, and it took only a few minutes to confirm that the major machines were still there and still intact. The next part would be far more tedious. Digging the latest inventory list out of the files, he got to work.

It was after midnight when he finally put up the list with a sigh—a sigh that hissed both relief and annoyance into his ears. "See?" he told himself as he trudged back to the door. "Whatever Pete did, he did it somewhere else. Unless," he amended, "he's just been stealing pencils and label stickers."

But checking all of those would take hours . . . and for now, at least, he was far too tired to bother. "But I *will* check them out eventually," he decided. "I mean, I don't really care about stuff like that, but if he'll steal pencils, who's to say he won't back a truck up here someday and take all the copiers?"

It was a question that sent a shiver up his back. If that happened, he would be out of business. Period.

He headed toward home, the awful thought of it churning through his mind . . . and, preoccupied with the defense of his property, he never even heard the mugger coming.

He just barely felt the crushing blow on the back of his head.

He came to gradually, through a haze of throbbing pain, to find himself staring up at a soft pastel ceiling. The forcibly clean smell he'd always associated with hospitals curled his nostrils. . . . "Hello?" he called tentatively.

There was a moment of silence. Then, suddenly, there was a young woman leaning over him. "Ah—you're back with us," she said, peering into each of his eyes in turn. "I'm Doctor Sanderson. How do you feel?"

"My head hurts," Radley told her. "Otherwise . . . okay, I guess. What happened?"

"Best guess is that you were mugged," she told him. "Apparently by someone who doesn't like long conversations with his victims. You were lucky, as these things go: no concussion, no bone or nerve damage, only minor bleeding. You didn't even crack your chin when you fell."

Reflexively, Radley reached up to rub his chin. Bristly, but otherwise undamaged. "Can I go home?"

Sanderson nodded. "Sure. You'll have to call someone to get you, though—your friend didn't wait."

"Friend?" Radley frowned. The crinkling of forehead skin gave an extra throb to his headache.

"Fellow who brought you in. Black man—medium build, slightly balding. Carried you about five blocks to get you here—sweating pretty hard by that time, I'll tell you." She frowned in turn. "He told the E/R people you needed help—we just assumed he was a friend or neighbor or something."

Radley started to shake his head, thought better of it. "Doesn't sound like anyone I know," he said. "I certainly wasn't with anyone when it happened."

Sanderson shrugged slightly. "Good Samaritan, then. A vanishing breed, but you still get them sometimes. Anyway. Your shoes are under the gurney there; come on down to the nurses' station when you're ready and we'll run you through the paperwork."

He thought about calling Alison to come get him, but decided he didn't really want to wake her up at this time of night. Especially not when he'd have to explain why he'd been out so late.

With his wallet gone, he had no money for a cab, but a tired-eyed policeman who had brought in a pair of prostitutes gave him a lift home. What the blow on the head had started, the long trek up the steps to his apartment finished, and he barely made it to his bed before collapsing.

His headache was mostly gone when he awoke. Along with most of the day.

"Yeah, I figured you were sick or something when you didn't show up this morning," Pete said when he called the print shop. "Didn't expect it was something like *this*, though. You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Radley assured him, a wave of renewed shame warming his face. How could he ever have thought someone with Pete's loyalty would betray him? "Let me shower and change and I'll come on down."

"You don't need to do that," Pete said. "Not hardly worth coming in now, anyway. If I may say so, it don't sound to me like you oughta be running 'round yet, and I can handle things here okay." There was a faintly audible sniff/snort, and Radley could visualize the other man smiling. "And I really don't wanna have to carry you all the way home if you fall apart on me."

"There's that," Radley conceded. "I guess you're right. Well . . . I'll see you in the morning, then."

"Only if you feel like it. Really—I can handle things

until you're well. Oops—gotta go. A customer just came in."

"Okay. Bye."

He hung up and gingerly felt the lump on the back of his head. Yes, Pete might have had to carry him home, at that. *That* little outing had sure gone sour.

As had his attempt to catch a murderer. And his attempt to solve a rape. And his attempt to stop an embezzlement.

In fact, everything the Book had given him had gone bad. One way or another, it had all gone bad.

"But it's truth," he gritted. "I mean, it is. How can truth be bad?"

He had no answer. With a sigh, he stood up from the kitchen chair. The sudden movement made his head throb, and he sat down again quickly. Yes, Pete might indeed have wound up carrying him.

Like someone else had already had to do.

Radley flushed with shame. In his mind's eye, he saw a medium-build black man, probably staggering under Radley's weight by the time he reached the hospital. Quietly helping to clean up the mess Radley had made of himself.

"I wish they'd gotten his name," he muttered to himself. "I'll never get a chance to thank him."

He looked down at the Book . . . and a sudden thought struck him. If the Book contained the names of all the criminals in town, why not the names of all the Good Samaritans, too?

He opened to the Yellow Pages, feeling a renewed sense of excitement. Perhaps this, he realized suddenly, was what the Book was really for. Not a tool for tracking down and punishing the guilty, but a means of finding and rewarding the good. The G's . . . there they were. Ge, Gi, Go . . .

There was no *Good Samaritans* listing.

Nor was there an *Altruists* listing. Nor were there listings for benefactor, philanthropist, hero, or patriot. Or for good example, salt of the earth, angel, or saint.

There was nothing.

He thought about it for a long time. Then, with only a slight hesitation, he picked up the phone.

Alison answered on the fourth ring. "Hello?"

"It's me," Radley told her. "Listen." He took a careful breath. "I know the difference now. You know—the difference between *true* and *truth*?"

"Yes?" she said, her voice wary.

"Yeah. *True* is a group of facts—any facts, in any combination. *Truth* is *all* the facts. Both sides of the story. The bad and the good."

She seemed to digest that. "Yes, I think you're right. So what does that mean?"

He bit at his lip. She'd been right, he could admit now; he *had* enjoyed the knowledge and power the Book had given him. "So," he said, "I was wondering if you'd like to come up. It's . . . well, you know, it's kind of a chilly night."

The Book burned with an eerie blue flame, and its non-plastic bag burned green. Together, they were quite spectacular. ♣

After the War



Greg Costikyan

I. SAMAR'S DAY

"Never falter!" roars the crowd, and I wince within, yet wave and smile. They have recognized me. The band ahead plays on, and we veterans march proudly. I wish this damn parade were over, and I in an inn with ale before me. "Never falter!"—the words I said to hearten the men at Maztallen, when the foe pressed nigh to King Sostenes's tent; the motto, also, of my house. Never falter, indeed.

The court asks little of me these days, content to leave me in my Eastmarch manse, the story of my decay well known. "Poor Glamargan," they say, and

Illustration by Nick Smith

shake their heads. "He's not been the same since the war," as if that were unusual. Neither has half the population of the Kingdom of White Crag; the maimed in body are seen on every street, the maimed in mind wander the land dazedly, objects of pity and, sometimes, fear.

I suppose I qualify as the maimed in mind.

The sky fills with fire and thunder; many veterans quail in remembrance, then realize that this magic is harmless and celebratory; no need to chant protective catriffs nor run for cover.

The court asks little of me, yet if I missed these annual celebrations, these repeated triumphs, hard questions would be asked. On this day, some eighteen years past, the armies of the Ten Lands decisively defeated the last defenders of the Morg. I led the army of White Crag, one of the Ten Allies, under King Sostenes; I struck down Moshasiousa, the Morgen general, and planted the wood through his heart. Thus was that ancient evil expunged from the earth; thus were the humans of the Morg freed from their thousand-year bondage, their bondage to foul blood-sucking vampires. Samar rejoices at our victory; all White Crag rejoices with him. I am Victor of Maztallen, Beloved of Samar, Warden of the Eastmarch, and a dozen other titles. My victories are romanticized in a hundred histories; old soldiers are proud to say they served with me. Short of death, I cannot escape this day.

If I have turned to drink and, say some, to madness, surely I yet remember the brave days when all humanity was united against the foe; surely I wish to take my place in the Samar's Day celebration.

Surely I need a drink. I wish I had not come.

The court asks little of me; but they ask me this.

The crowd cheers at the sky's display, and I am sick at heart.

II. THE WAR'S BEGINNING

The war began for me a quarter century ago, the day my father received the King's summons. That day, I had gone hunting in the company of my brothers. It was winter, and in my father's barony, snow lies over the land three months of the year. A crust develops through repeated thaws and freezing. A horse will fall right through the crust and, when ridden at speed, risks a broken leg; we could not ride, but went forth on snowshoes.

It was a cold, cold day, far below the point of freezing; my father had called us madmen, and laughed, and told us that the prey would be huddling someplace warm. Yet out we went, heavily clothed, with scarfs across face and two layers of gloves. The air was thin and crisp and bit the lungs; despite our clothing, the cold penetrated from our extremities inward, and we lunged forward on our snowshoes with a will, as much to warm ourselves from exercise as to continue moving.

White snow, black branches, blue sky, and pallid sun; the labored breathing of three young men, the soft

squelch of shoes on snow, and all else quiet. It is strange how some memories stay with you; though I suppose my memory is now composed of all the winters I spent in my father's house. Despite his warning, we did find prey; a thin, haggard doe, drinking through a hole she had knocked in the ice. We came upon her downwind, and crouched, and tried to control our panting. My elder brother, Marek, shot her with his bow; the arrow went through the eye, a clean death. And then we carried her home, I bringing up the rear. The doe bled a little as we went, red splashes on white snow.

We consigned her to the cooks, and quaffed mulled cider to restore warmth, and changed our clothing; and a servant came with our father's summons.

"Epek!" said Father, a magic word; the candles about the great hall sprang to life. He was no mage, but knew a spell or two. The great oak table bore flagons of wine, silver dishes, candelabra; the high stone walls were hung with tapestries and banners. The fireplace was already laid with logs; I went to it, and kindled it, with a minor sorcery of my own.

Father sat at the table, and motioned us to sit nearby him. He poured wine for each of us, red wine from the south, slightly cooled as the room was cool. "I have news from the King," he said, and pulled a piece of parchment from within his tunic. He handed it first to Marek, who studied it, grinned, and handed it to me. The bulk of it was whereases and whereats and contempt for the foe; my eyes were drawn to the final paragraph:

"Wherefore, we, Sostenes, by the Grace of Samar King of White Crag, Defender of the Faith, Duke of the Seven Demesnes, etc., etc., etc., do hereby charge our vassal, Baron Glamargan, to levy the ban and the second ban, and assemble with his kinfolk, knights, vassals, liegemen, and retainers at Whitebridge City by the first day of Spring."

It was war.

I handed the summons to my younger brother Jehan.

War! Valorous deeds, booty, fame, and victory. War is good to minor nobility; those who distinguish themselves in the eyes of their King can, in a day, receive titles and lands it would take a hundred years of slow advancement to earn otherwise. We rejoiced, my brothers and I.

Marek, rest easy in your Morgen bog. Jehan, I pray your soul left your body when the vampires drained it; else, when I destroyed the pallid thing you had become, I slew kin. Father, I am glad you lived to see our first victories, yet died before your sons were slain.

III. THE FOE

Who was our enemy? The Empire of the Morg, foul land of pain and fear, domain of evil. Our traditional foe, whom we were taught to hate from infancy; the enemy, so said the priests of Samar, of all humanity.

Yet little we knew of Morgem things, for all White Crag's border stretched three hundred miles along that realm. Histories say a Morgem Emperor outlawed trade with the outside world some eight hundred years ago; those who travelled to the Morg rarely returned, and none came forth from it.

Our maps of the Morg were largely blank; we knew where its major cities lay, we knew it stretched for a thousand miles and more, but little else. We knew it was powerful, and large, and we feared it; our war would show us how large, as we fought our way mile by mile the bloody mile across it.

The rulers of the Morg, its aristocracy, were vampires—eternal, evil creatures, battering on the blood of the living. For a thousand years they had ruled; the humans they governed were their slaves, their livestock, their cattle. They imposed a twisted religion, building huge temples, where humans came to have their bodies drained and cast aside. The Morg was a vast charnel house, an empire built by predators on men for the benefit of the predators. Who knows what dark rites they practiced, what agonies they inflicted on their subjects? Who knows what corruption those incorruptible vampiric bodies could hold?

No one, now, for we, in our righteousness, destroyed the foul temples when we encountered them, torched the citadels wherein their sorceries were performed, slew with wood and fire the vampires we discovered. We smashed their religion, and imposed wholesome worship of Samar. We destroyed their books and writings, to expunge the twisted teachings of the vampires. We looted their wealth and sent it home.

We did not merely defeat the Morg; we smashed it, annexed it, reshaped it. Never would we permit that ancient evil to rise again; never would vampires be permitted to hold men as slaves.

The flap of wings in darkened sky; the helpless look upward, their faces drawn and shiny. The fangs penetrate, and blood flows.

For the rulers of the Morg, we had both hatred and fear; the fear the doe feels for the hunter.

But we are not kine; we are men. Maneaters, we slay.

IV. HOLY WAR

When the Ten Lands war among each other, it is honor, loot, and land for which we fight. The war against the Morg was otherwise; there were no rules, no holds were barred, it was a holy war, of all against all.

The ban and the second ban did not suffice; every one of the Ten Lands imposed universal conscription. In seven years of war, our population was decimated. The family without its tale of loss is rare.

There were no polite parleys, no prisoner exchanges, no chivalry in this war. We had no concern to spare the land, as we do when we war among ourselves; whole counties bubble yet, or lie barren, sere and spare.

Can you imagine being on the battlefield? You are a pikeman, standing in ordered ranks with your compa-

triot. Above you, the sky fills with a pall of darkness: the Morgem sorcerers labor to dim the sun, so their vampires may operate unhindered. Before you, the plain seems filled with sweating Morgem slaves, bronze shields overlapping, swords at shoulder. At the corners of your formation are men in robes; they are muttering, protective cantripts.

Suddenly, a monstrous flash and thunder from the right; a fire ball has struck. The sky is filled with streaks of light; about you, the plain burns and smokes. The men in robes dance desperately, scream words at the sky, pull herbs from their robes and toss them into the flames; you can see the power flicker about their fingers. Their shield works; the balls of fire scatter about your formation, but no one is injured. The wizards pant and sweat; you desperately want to urinate. The wizards cannot take much of this; and if they fail, you are roasted meat.

Roaring elementals dance across the field, tossing men like matchsticks, battling one another. Griffon-riders fight vampires in the sky. The clouds part, and a laughing, smoky figure reaches down and smashes men to bloody pulp. You get the order to advance.

The wizards caper once again, and blue fire plays about your pikes. Shoulder to shoulder, you march slowly forward. As your pikes reach the enemy shield wall, Morgem slaves try to bat the pikes aside with their swords. If they should succeed, you would be at danger; pikes are useless at close quarters. A few pikes fly high, but most advance together. When pikes strike shields, blue fire discharges, and Morgem jerk in instant death. The living retreat, and you step over the bodies. Behind you, followers spike the heart of each dead man, and chant a prayer, to make sure they cannot be raised as undead.

A Morgman ducks under the pikes and slashes through the belly of the man next to you. You drop your pike and draw sword; metal clashes, and another of your friends drops his pike, pulls a dagger, and stabs the Morgman from the rear.

The wizards are too intent upon the foe before you; hail rattles from the sky on your formation, but this hail is rock, and men go down. About you are the screams of the dying, the reek of urine, feces, blood and vomit. Suddenly, too many pikes are down, and the Morgmen with a howl advance. It is hand-to-hand, a wild melee; formation is forgotten.

Your captain is shrieking; a boy with him waves a banner. You kill the Morgman before you, grab a downed pike, and retreat toward the banner. Along with the remnants of your battalion, you struggle to rebuild the pikewall, in circle around the captain. He curses and orders; the Morgmen hoot and press forward.

Suddenly, there are cavalry about you; the Morgmen flee before their hooves. The general has seen your section of the line collapse, and dispatched a portion of his reserve. The battle swirls beyond you, and for the moment, your little band is out of it.

You pant, and now begin to shake. At once, you notice all the cuts, minor wounds, and contusions that

cover your arms and body. Somewhere in all this time, you did wet your pants.

Perhaps one in five of your battalion is still alive.

V. EASTMARCH

Twenty-five years can heal the wounds the body suffers, but memories are not forgotten. Now, I am Warden of the Eastmarch, the lands White Crag annexed from the defeated Morg. My year is spent inspecting forts and visiting border lords. The Eastmarch borders on lands annexed by Quintara and Fordlandish; with the Morg defeated, the old game of kingly rivalry begins anew, and we must be on guard against the others. I wander the Eastmarch for most of the year, and spend the winter months in my manse, drinking too much, reading reports, and making a nuisance of myself to the staff.

My vassals are bronze-skinned Morgmen. They have been docile since the war; they have exchanged vampires for feudal lords, and if they regret the change, they do not show regret to us. Well they should not, for they would be whipped for their insolence.

The priests of Samar preach among them, and the old rites are forbidden. They till the soil as ever they did. Their families must have their own tales of loss, but to us, they show the smiling face of the conquered.

Their population has declined, from war loss, from disease, from the famine that followed. Their trade has collapsed, and perhaps they are impoverished by their former standards; it is hard to tell. Yet they seem not to miss their overlords and the culture we destroyed. Culture is sustained by cities and learned men; peasants know not of it, and care not at its lack.

The brighter among them, those who hope to join a lord's household, or enter trade, or apprenticeship as a craftsman, learn our language. In a hundred years, or two, the Morgmen tongue will be no more.

I have troubled myself to learn their language, and ask them of the Morg and how life was before. They answer in generalities, telling me what they think I want to hear: how the vampires sucked their blood, and tortured them, and how grateful they are that we have come.

On my desk I have a carving, a stone pried from a temple, long since destroyed. It shows a vampire, stooping over the prostrate body of a young woman. It is a fearsome sight, and visitors to my study have examined it with loathing.

Yet I look at it, and wonder. Can the vampire's look be tenderness? Can the woman's face show pride?

VI. MAZTALLEN

Maztallen was the capital city of the Morg, the lair of its emperor, the largest city any of us had ever seen. By then, the vampires must have known the end was nigh. Seven years of war it had taken, and uncounted lives, but most of the Morg was in free human hands. Here, at their greatest city, they made their last stand.

Maztallen was too big for walls; slums and suburbs spilled out from its center. No wall there was, even at the city core, for Maztallen had not known war for a thousand years. Morgmen armies fought and conquered at the empire's periphery; it took an alliance of all the world to penetrate this far.

Moshaios was the Morg general's name, the greatest of their commanders. Our histories translate his name as "Death Rattle"; a literal translation would be "Susurrus of Life's Last Breath." His army was a strange mixture of ill-equipped rabble and hardened veterans, hasty levies and the remnants of once-great armies.

Contingents of all ten human armies were there, all that could be spared from the pacification of the provinces. No kingdom would let any other take this last prize unwatched; all must take part in the final conquest.

My great victory. The army of White Crag stood back, part of our reserve. We stood in formation and watched as others attacked. I was too war-weary to mind; better to see spells strike from afar than to see them strike around you.

Throughout the wars, we had fought vampires only rarely. They used their slaves as soldiers, themselves as officers; units of vampires alone were rare.

But Maztallen was home to ten thousand vampires; they wheeled above its skies like smoke. Few were warriors; most were priests of their fearsome religion, scholars, craftsmen. War-wise they might not be; yet each had the strength of ten men, and now they must fight or die the truedead.

From the clouds, they descended, hundreds, thousands, armed. They were after our commanders—the leaders of the ten armies. They were after King Sostenes—and myself.

"Never falter!" quoth I, and slashing skyward, drove a vampire off, and gathered men around me. We fought our way to King Sostenes's tent, and saved him. We rallied, grabbed poles, pulled vampires from the sky and staked them.

White Crag was lucky; four kingdoms lost their kings that day, and our supreme commander, de Montrachet, was drained of his life's blood.

Battle ebbed and flowed, men lived and died. I shall not chronicle each charge and counter-charge, each sorcery and ritual performed. Histories aplenty may you read.

Two days passed, and we had driven the foe back into the city proper. A quarter of our armies were dead or wounded, but morale was high; the end was near.

The army of White Crag assembled. Three sorcerers of the wizards' corps drew wisps of silk about us, burned herbs in braziers, struck red-hot iron on slate, drew rain from the sky, then shouted words of magic.

Mist swirled about us, clammy darkness, grayness.

Then, about us were marble walls, vaulting ceilings, and rank upon rank of coffins. Teleportations are rarely done in battle; too easy for the foe to counter them, with loss of those transported.

The Morgmen must have too few sorcerers remaining to notice. They were sorely weakened.

We were in the great temple itself.

Rustles sounded around us, and the enemy attacked. The darkness was their ally; shouted prayers were ours. Our priests glowed with the light of Samar. The metal points of our pikes had been removed, and the shafts sharpened; wood was the weapon with which we fought.

Pallid forms raged with the strength of a dozen men, but our discipline held, our pikewall now aimed upward at a foe that attacked from above. We fought toward the inner temple.

And there found Moshasiousa. Over the dust that had been his emperor, he stood, stake in hand. The emperor expired by the hand of his servant, cheating his enemies of his truedeath.

My guard pinned the general to the wall, and I drove the wood through his heart.

For twice seven days, the armies of the Ten Lands ranged Maztallen, looting, raping, and carousing.

And then we torched the city, and drove its inhabitants forth into the country.

VII. PALIMPSESTS OF AN EMPIRE

What kind of an empire can last for a thousand years? One ruled by immortals. Predators were they, and we prey; there is no question of that.

Yet does the shepherd torture sheep? When he shears them, do they fear him?

We were thorough in our destruction, for we had nothing but hatred and fear for what we destroyed—so thorough that I cannot find answers to my questions. The Morgmen will say only what I wish to hear. The books and records of the Morg have all been burned. Only a few statues, scant inscriptions, objects of art remain.

How many mice are required to support a cat? At the King's granary, they must destroy most of the kittens their cats bear, else they would be overrun with starveling mousers. If the cats were men, perhaps they'd purposefully limit their own population.

As the vampires must have. When drained, a human becomes a vampire; too many drained means too few humans to support the vampires' numbers. Blood-hunger would cause vampires to drain more, until few humans would remain alive, and vampires would fall upon each other in frenzy.

Yet they survived for a thousand years. They must have controlled their hungers.

In the temples of Samar, we drink ritual wine, in lieu of Samar's blood, blood shed for the grace of mankind.

Did, in similar wise, worshippers at the Morgen shrines offer a portion of their blood to their masters? Were they not sucked dry, but . . . tapped?

Thus might each vampire survive, without increasing vampiric numbers.

What did they feel for their human subjects? Were the humans merest cattle, slaves?

The vampires would control their numbers, lest their civilization fall; but some vampires would die the truedeath by accident or happenstance. And the human population, wisely shepherded, would grow. New vampires would be needed.

Cattle may not become men; but men may become vampires.

Whom would they choose to join their ranks? Would they choose at random?

Or choose the wisest of their society—scholars, warriors, mages, and philosophers? Would they preserve the best for all eternity?

Why would they not?

What does the vampire feel for his prey, if his prey offers blood willingly, and hopes one day to become a vampire, too?

Jehan! When I slew you, did you know me?

What beauties did their art describe? What knowledge did their books contain?

We know not even what we have lost.

We did not understand, and so we named it evil.

I stare at my carving. The look on his face; is it tenderness? The look on hers; can it be pride? ♦

The Sixty-Five Million Year Sleep

or,
The Really Long Goodbye

Sharon N. Farber

I woke with the sort of headache that feels like an ankylosaur is rattling around inside your cranium. My office was lit by moonlight, and neon from the dive next door, and a bit extra from some new supemova in the western sky.

With great effort, I raised my head from my desk and looked at the clock. It seemed to have stopped at half past the Cretaceous.

"God," I groaned. "I wish I were extinct."

"That can be arranged," said a strange voice.

I sat up quick, and started for the left-hand desk drawer.

"None of that," the voice snarled, and I could see now that it belonged to a hand holding a Luger. A little work focusing, and I could follow the stubby little hand back to the squinty-eyed tyrannosaurus it belonged to, standing in the doorway. The effort wasn't worth it.

"Go on, go for it. I haven't got forever," the pug continued. He



Illustration by Douglas Axmann

glanced at the clock. "You oughta set that thing," he said.

"This call business, or purely social?" I asked, still going slowly for the left-hand drawer, but taking out a bottle instead of my rod. I left the drawer open.

"Social," the tyrannosaurus answered.

"You've got a nice way of meeting people, lizard-hips."

He put away his Luger. I poured two glasses of hooch, and took a long slug of the scales of the therapist that had bit me. My head was starting to clear.

"We'll pay two big ones a day."

That cleared my head a little more. "We? The brain in your butt gets a vote?"

The tyrannosaurus looked real mean at that, and his dinky hands clenched at their glass, but I'd read him right, and he didn't go for his gun.

"Keep cracking wise, dick, and you'll be wearing sandstone overshoes. We as in concerned parties. We want to know who killed Dinah Soar."

It started to make sense. There are a lot of bones buried around this place, and Soar knew them all. Some say the bones tell a story—a story of a hot-blooded lizard who rose from humble semiaquatic origins to rule this ecosystem. Soar's friends tended to be large and unsavory, and her enemies tended to find themselves toes up in the Morrison formation—the next time they'd see daylight, it would be as Exxon crude. I didn't like the connection. I don't insist on keeping my forelimbs clean, but I like my conscience clear.

"Murder, huh? I heard it was an accidental death."

The pug snarled again. He had a limited repertoire of responses. I could see week-old duckbill stuck in his teeth. "Sure, the boss disappears, and a meteor lands in her garden, so the cops claim it musta landed on her. Don't tell me no fairytales."

It was pretty unlikely, someone as important as Dinah Soar put out by a rock from space. But with no corpus to habeas, this was not going to be your average case. It might even prove unsolvable. I emptied the bottle, for luck.

Soar lived in a mansion on the flatlands, the sort of place they do two-page photo spreads on. The only thing wrong with it that I could see was the immense meteor imbedded in the back yard, where the swimming pool and the scenic garden used to be.

"I don't blame the cops for not wanting to look under it," I said, and sneezed. Iridium dust was everywhere. I'd seen enough of the rock, so I headed into the house. Some maids—dusting like crazy and squeaking in their incomprehensible language—saw me and scurried away. I sneezed again. They were mammals. Soar really did keep bad company.

The butler came up, with an officious manner and a prep-school accent he could only have aquired from watching TV. He was a mammal too. "May I help you?"

He had big eyes, and probably bore his young live. I didn't like him. "Nice habitat you've got here."

"Of course, sir. May I be of any service?"

"Only if you can tell me who boxed your employer."

"I believe that the authorities have determined that she is beneath the meteor." He sniffed. Pretty cool for a guy who'd be out of a job soon.

I went over to look at the portraits over the mantle. The one in the middle was clearly Soar—big and ugly as hell, and obviously hot-blooded. The portrait on her right was labeled Apatosaurus, but I recognized him under his alias, Brontosaurus. Archaeopteryx was on the left, looking just the way she did before she took wing to evade prosecution.

"Nice company," I remarked.

"But so well painted," replied Soar's butler.

"Who is out here . . . Oh!" A cute little chick had come in from the study, and was looking at me with intense unblinking eyes. She was covered in pastel feathers. My heart began to beat like it had four chambers.

"Introduce me to the bird," I hissed at the butler.

She did it herself. "I am . . . *was* Miss Soar's secretary."

"Then you're just the one I need. Is there a will?"

The bird looked a bit upset. "Well, yes . . ."

The butler said, "Other than a few minor bequests, Miss Soar's employees inherit everything."

"Everything? Pretty generous of her." The butler was looking smug. I wondered what a mammal would do with a lot of money. Probably build a jewel-encrusted den for his mate to give birth in.

"No kin?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Soar had many relatives. They're gathered in the next room," said the bird, and she led me into the study, where all the cousins were reading and rereading the will, as if they could make the words change that way. Once I'd recognized Soar's family, I understood why she'd left everything to the help.

"Look who's here," said Alligator. "Think I did in the old broad for this bunch of Florida swampland?" Soar must have liked him about as much as I did.

"Oh, I can imagine you killing her, Al, but you're too vicious to do it that subtly. You'd have torn her to shreds on a public thoroughfare."

He laughed a good-natured sociopath laugh.

"And what about me, Op?" hissed Snake, offering me a decanter. The booze looked smooth, but I knew enough not to take a drink from the guy the cops and I had repeatedly failed to make on poisoning raps.

"You wouldn't kill for such small stakes."

"Then how about old Lizard?" Snake pointed his well-manicured but rudimentary hands at his brother. "No, you can't suspect him. He's so slow and stupid that he couldn't kill his shadow on a cloudy day."

"Now, d-don't be so ung-grateful," Lizard stuttered. "I think Dinah was very g-generous to give me the desert wasteland."

"Swell family," I said. All in all, I think I preferred the mammals. "Enjoy the leavings, boys."

We went back into the living room. I was eyeing the bird, and she was eyeing me back. I know I liked what I saw, and she looked like it was mutual.

The butler was standing there with my hat. I could take a hint.

"Y'know," I told him, "you had the most to gain. Maybe you murdered her. It'd be traditional."
"Of course, sir," replied the mammal. "I'll admit it. I made Miss Soar extinct by eating her eggs."
That's the trouble with the Age of Reptiles. Everyone's a comedian.

I went downtown to a fern bar I know. The neighborhood used to be classy, but it was on its way downhill. No one seemed to be on the street except duckbills, just over the landbridge from Asia, and a few drunken ichthyosaurs on leave.

There was a hadrosaur on the sidewalk outside, honking a melancholy tune through his long, curved horn. The hat in front of him was empty except for a few coins.

"Sonny?" I asked. "Is that you?" The last time I'd seen him, he'd been in a big band, playing the Ritz.

He stopped his song, opening one dreamy eye to look at me. "Band went extinct, man."

"What happened? Lose your niche to competition?"

"No, man. I think it was the government." He went back to his song. I put a dollar in the hat. When I came out later, the last of the bluesmen was gone.

Sewage runoff was starting a grand canyon by the curb. I stepped over it, and headed into the bar.

The bartender said me coming, and had a stiff one on the rocks poured for me before I reached the counter. "What's new?" I asked.

He answered cheerfully. "I was just readin' about continental drift in the Sunday supplement. Did you know that in sixty-five million years, Los Angeles and San Francisco will be only a few hundred miles apart?"

"Imagine that," I said. "Doesn't seem right. How about some steamed trilobites?"

"Extinct. Can't get 'em anymore," the barkeep told me.

"Ammonite chips?"

"Them either."

"You got *anything* to snack on?"

"This is a fern bar, mac."

"Okay then, give me a fern."

"Fried, baked, or au gratin?"

"Hey, what's that?" I'd noticed something soft and colorful stuck in an empty bottle.

"It's a magnolia."

"Thanks, that's a big help. What's a magnolia?"

"A flower. It's the latest thing. You want one for your girl?"

"Why, are they edible?"

He leaned forward, whispering. "They're angiosperm sexual devices, buddy. Makes the broads horny as hell."

I wondered how much he was paying the cops to turn their backs on this seedy, disgusting little side business. Just looking at the thing had made me lose my appetite, so I took my drink over to Pterodactyl. He was slumped in a booth, surrounded by empty shotglasses. He looked like he hadn't groomed since the middle of the Mesozoic, and smelled worse.

"Long time no see, Terry," I said, sitting down.

He flinched.

"I'm not going to hurt you; I just want information."

Terry shrugged. "I don't know nothing anymore. I used to see everything. Now I'm lucky to catch an updraft."

"I'm interested in who killed Dinah Soar. What's the skinny on the streets?"

He started playing with a shot glass til I got the idea, bought a bottle at the bar, and put it in front of him with the cap still on.

"Some people think it was just her time," Terry began hopefully.

I opened the bottle, poured myself a shot, and made a lot of pleased noises while I drank.

"Some people say she caught the plague from immigrants. Or ate a poisonous plant."

All nonsense, of course. I poured another shot, and held it up so it sparkled in the light from the supernova.

"Other people think it was the nova," he continued. "Or cosmic rays, or volcanic ash, or a comet."

I handed him the shot glass. He took it with shaking hands and trembling wings. "What's the smart money on, Terry?"

He downed the drink, and leaned close while I poured another. "Maybe she didn't diversify enough," he said. "So she couldn't handle changes. Maybe the climate just got too hostile, you know what I mean?"

I did, considering her underworld connections. "You mean, things just got too hot?"

"Or maybe she got iced," Terry replied, and got a look on his face like he was about to tell me something important, when a shot rang out. Terry's face hit the table.

I dove for cover, but no more bullets came, so I crawled to the back door. Panicking duckbills were all over the saloon. I could hear cops in the distance.

Iced, Terry'd said. It seemed like a good time to check out Soar's refrigerator.

I went back to my office and had a drink first. Then I sat down to think about everything.

The door swung open, and two triceratops came in, waving guns.

"Put those down before you hurt yourselves."

They didn't appreciate that at all.

"Wise guy, huh?" One of the hornheads was trying to act tough. "One more word outta you, and you're prehistory."

"No, we need him," the other said. They checked over the office, to make sure no one else was there. It was pretty funny the way they kept walking between their guns and me.

"Why not just settle down and tell me about it?" I offered them the bottle.

"No way," said Larry and Curly. "We're respectable family men. We've got a herd and young to protect." They looked wistfully at the bottle. I could understand. If I had seventeen wives, I'd need a drink too.

Larry put some money on the table. "We want you to find out who killed Dinah Soar."

I grinned. Two clients paying for the same job. It was a private dick's dream. "What's your connection?"

"None!" they said defensively. "Only, we have reason to suspect that whoever killed her may have it in for all homeothermic reptiles."

I handed back their money—all small bills, with bubble gum stuck to some of them. "No need to be paranoid, boys. Whoever planted Soar had a private grudge. You're safe. Go home to your herds." Larry looked grateful, but Curly stopped in the door and waved his gun like he wanted to say something big, only he couldn't think of any impressive last words. Then they were gone.

I went back up to Soar's place. I suppose I was mostly just hoping to see the bird again. The house was all closed up and quiet. I jimmied open the door and went to the kitchen. The fridge was in a corner, covered with cartoons making fun of amphibians. The kitchen clock told me that it was almost the Tertiary. Time flies when you're having fun.

I opened the fridge. Nothing there but condiments, and some leftover cycad casserole that looked fossilized. I checked out the freezer. There was nothing there. *Nothing*. Not even any ice.

Then I heard a soft footstep. But before I could turn, something hard came down on my head, and the lights went out.

When I came to, I was back in my office, with the clock still reading half-past, and the supernova still taking away the night. I almost thought it had all been a dream, and my headache just a hangover, but when I felt along my cranial ridge, there was a lump where I'd been sapped.

I didn't like that. This case was getting personal.

I looked over at the other chair. My pal the tyrannosaurus was there. He wasn't breathing. Bullet holes were ventilating both his brains.

I was being set up. I didn't like being played for the patsy.

I went for the door, but couldn't get it open. Something seemed to be blocking it from the outside. I got down and looked through the keyhole.

The corridor was full of dead triceratops.

The poor dumb grazers had just been trying to protect their families, and now they were extinct. I felt tension build inside me, like two continental plates about to crack apart.

I had to leave by the window. The moon was setting, and in the eastern sky you could just make out the dawning of the Cenozoic. I caught a cab back to Soar's.

I found the bird in her room, throwing things into a suitcase.

She saw me and gave a big smile with that cute little beak of hers. "Oh, honey, you're all right!"

"Amazing, huh?"

"Come away with me. We must flee—someone's killing hot-blooded reptiles," she said.

"And how'd you know about that?" I said.

She flinched, realizing her mistake.

"Why so worried, babe? You're in no danger. Birds aren't even related to reptiles, are they?"

She reached into her case, and leveled a shotgun at me. For someone small, she traveled heavy.

"You killed her, and put her on ice somewhere," I said. "Then you killed the others, to cover your tracks. Because *you're* the true descendant of Dinah Soar, and if you'd come forward at the right time and contest the will, you'd inherit everything."

"How'd you figure it out?"

"Those portraits in the living room—they must have been her kids. And you're the spitting image—should I say feathered image—of Archaeopteryx. Which makes you the old dame's grandchild."

"But I can't be a Soar," the chick cried. "Look, no teeth! No fingers!"

"Cosmetic surgery can do wonders nowadays."

She smiled. "Okay, smart boy. You've got it all worked out—except for one thing. I didn't kill Dinah. She thought she'd been here long enough, so she hitched a ride on a UFO and said she'd be back in a billion years or so. The ice was just to keep the beer cool for the trip."

"Nice try. Tell it to the judge," I suggested. "He'll know coprolite from shinola."

She aimed the shotgun. "Too bad, you missed your chance. I can be a lot of fun, I'm monogamous, and I love to travel. Well, this is goodbye."

A shot rang out.

Only the bird fell over.

The butler walked in, his piece still smoking.

"Regrettable," he said.

I went back to the living room, heading for the sideboard to pour a tall one. I downed it in one swallow.

The butler poured me another, then rang for the maids.

"There is a carcass in the next room. Please remove it."

The little mammals went in, then came back chattering.

"She's gone!" cried the butler.

There was just empty rug where the bird had lain, without even any blood on it. I found the slug imbedded in a model of a sailback. "You didn't even hit her. She was just playing dead, so she could get away."

The butler shrugged. "It doesn't matter. She'll never dare contest the will now. Which means that we inherit everything."

I must have looked shocked. These furry little groundhugging carrion eaters inherit the world? They couldn't even shoot straight.

"Give us a chance," the butler said. "We'll grow. We'll adapt. Pretty soon, you won't even recognize the old place."

I felt a chill come over me, like a succession of glaciations.

Outside, a new age dawned. ♦

Erasure

Robert Frazier

The Kanes are not your everyday bachelor brothers who come home to the bland familiarity of each other's cooking, the type who rarely venture into relationships serious enough to threaten the fraternal bonds that help them, perhaps, survive after a troubled childhood. No, the three seem alive with charisma. Young and muscular, possessing a square-jawed handsomeness that's flatlined a thousand cotillion hearts. Local-born Gulf War and Honduras battle heroes with a history of adventure. Dedicated, inventive thinkers. Real men. Yet they now aspire to a banal, anonymous lifestyle far exceeding that of introverted people, of those whose bedrock nature it is to be antisocial, removed, and invisible to the world. Yes, and we have noticed that the Kanes work damned hard at it.

There are great numbers of us voyeurs, a coffee-klatch society of Virginia elders and bored wid-



Illustration by William Warren, Jr.

owers who set to recording the events at the Kane manse and commenting at length on the meaning-of-it-all, and if the brothers know of this, which some of us suspect they do, they may be working on a way to screen us out. This only serves to tighten our scrutiny, and it gives our observations a skewed, more speculative bent.

We meet in the early morning at an abandoned plantation school that overlooks the back acres of Cottonwood Manor and the riotous garden that the Kanes raise there like an unrequited love from the country's worn soil. From row upon row of folding chairs, we stand and report the changes that have occurred in the last days, and we sketch out a strategy. Who of us will log some hours processing information on an available computer in the county seat at Rustburg. Who is elected to flag down the UPS drivers before they reach the manor, and ask about imaginary packages while carefully noting among the real ones what new electronics deliveries the Kanes are about to receive. We choose a person to brew the black coffee that fuels our vigil, and we decide who of us must sit their hour at the telescope and watch the three work through their offbeat routines.

The three. There is Ted, who throws his shoulders into cultivating a hedge of bamboo and brush that compromises our view by midsummer. Sandy-haired Ted, who stands well over six feet tall with big arms and an expansive waist, though at times he looks diminished to the comparative size of his brothers. Joel approaches Ted's height, yet he often looks smaller, shrunken despite the exaggerated perspective of the lens on our scope. Each day he dresses in blue work clothes, then climbs high ladders to reconfigure the cables that run like kudzu vines over the roof and exterior of the building. And there is Roger—the oldest and brainiest—as he orchestrates the show. Running in and out of the rear portico doors, computer printouts in hand, to yell up at Joel and wave his arms in abstract articulations of some private language they all share. Roger's hair is long and white-blond, gone ragged as the khakis that hang unwashed from his frame. His eyes are icy flashes. Roger hardly appears smaller than his siblings, yet he's thin now, bordering on anorexic; he disappears from view when he turns sideways. We suspect there is a curious agency at work here. Some quirk of light that obscures our vision in the little valley where the James River is bordered by glowing acres of cornfields and shimmering stands of magnolia and dogwood.

With such changes happening, there is much for our organization to record. Especially since the activity at Cottonwood Manor increases in intensity with the passing of each week. And as the three brothers grow more antisocial and removed from the world, they seem to grow less distinct to us.

Certain observations are stressed.

First, we have documented their tendency toward complete independence. They keep Alpine goats for dairy products, pigs for meat. They cultivate everything that they can possibly consume: grains, condiment roots, a dozen varieties of apples for sauces and vinegars, loafas

for sponges, every manner of vegetable, the ubiquitous okra, everything. They've been working up to this self-sufficiency for a third of a century, a project—like their education—begun by Big Daddy Kane, and they stock in canning jars and canned goods until their larders must be bursting. They also stock up with bug repellents, origami paper, garlic presses, baking dishes, endless volumes of electronics components, and, for some inexplicable reason, motor parts for Edsels. Though many of us stick to the traditional belief that their corn is tilled for the sake of creamed casseroles, or feed for the livestock, a few of us concede that the brothers possess the necessary technology for distilling their own gasohol. And much more. They create a fiefdom with three rulers; with just three vassals.

Second, the volume of components that they use astounds us. From room to room they network Macintoshes, cable-encrusted boxes we photograph through tall windows when the shades are raised. Their phone bills thicken with entries, which, by a lucky bit of sleuthing from our lone hacker, prove to be made on phone lines dedicated to their modems. These are calls to Earth-wart hotlines, the American Medical Association, top-secret science labs, Dial-A-Dad, and some we believe are data trades with the man who invented erasable bond typing paper. In the yard, they construct a dish antenna, its bowl luminous white in the dark and turned toward the stars like an ear straining to hear the distant warbling of a sea bird. They strive for this increased communication, though they screen all incoming telephone calls, and greet all visitors—including delivery men—with prerecorded messages at a flame-red bush that serves, to the trained eye only, as their front gate. There is a decent argument for isolation, not independence, as their goal.

Then there are the disappearances. Not thefts of material items; Big Daddy left the boys rich enough to afford what their souls require, and we cast them more as saints than as criminals. Nor do animals or people turn up missing. The activities of this family are bizarre enough that some of us dub them the Ar-Kanes, but their attitude toward the community, toward the rest of humanity, seems benign and wholly lacking in either negative or positive emotional ties. They do not experiment with any lives except their own.

You see, it's information about them that disappears. Before they holed up on the grounds, they stole pertinent file folders and records; now, they burgle online. Birth entries get wiped by computer viruses from files at the Campbell County courthouse, as do entries on military duty, state license fees, a livestock variance for keeping buffalo, and three dated applications for town chicken auditor. Whatever they conjure with their computers, it performs miracles, while the estate—our one research lawyer claims—sidesteps taxation under the umbrella of a nonprofit organization whose structure is so hidden in dodges and complicated legalese that the brothers no longer appear part of it, though it pays for their phone and for their mail orders and other basics. Yet, their actions move beyond those necessary for

mere tax evasion. We rule that out as a motive. They systematically remove themselves from the records of civilization, right down to excisions from Falwell's mailing lists, retouch work beyond the IRS security codes, drop-outs from the library's hard disk on borrowers and overdue offenders, revisions in census counts; in sum, from the interconnected weave of information which marks us all as different from the animal kingdoms we deem ourselves above. They are the only ones in the county who receive no contest envelopes, no solicitations, no free samples of lemon-scented spermicidal jelly.

Then, too, there are the varied meteorological phenomena. Our gathering has documented these closely, and they cannot be argued.

When a hot spell leaves the air sluggish and leaden in our lungs, and the countryside retreats to shaded porches and mint juleps over stockpiles of ice, there is generally a breeze along this stretch of the river. It stirs the trees with a soothing purr and brings relief to our sweating faces. And it pushes clouds into miniature formations that dapple the Kane estate with shadows. The nights grow cool, nights as chill as a springfed pond with a thousand peepers ballooning their shrill chorus. Their passage into day leaves dew on the grounds of Cottonwood Manor, while the grasses remain dry in the fields about them.

If an extended dry spell grips Virginia with its paranoia of failed crops and bankrupt farm loans, our town is spared. The clouds gather into a single thunderhead over the area and dump buckets of rain. The resulting cacophony on the tin roof of the plantation school deafens those of us still young enough to hear, and nags at those who hear a distant roar of surf where before they heard nothing outside a ten-foot radius. Often, though, the rainfall is precise in its boundaries, matching the fence lines of their property, and we remain parched while they are drenched.

Occasionally, a tornado front pushes into Virginia through the Blue Ridge Mountains further west, and the central counties have to button down their farm equipment and herd their livestock. Folks huddle in their houses and pray for deliverance. The Kanes do nothing of the sort. It's business as usual. The gardening. The antenna construction. The cabling that patches together such oddities, now, as scanners, cash registers, and a life-size replica of José Canseco with a flashing bat. Very little changes. And if a twister wanders directly into the area, as one did recently, they look out across the corn and laugh at the darkened skies. The funnel wobbles by while the house stands white and impervious within a towering shaft of sunlight. The light holds steady within a wild blow of rain and tree limbs and debris. Then the manor seems to levitate within the light, to inflate above the gravity of the storm with Canseco at the helm. It is a sight.

The most breathtaking phenomenon, however, is the manor under a full moon. Moonbeams pass through the energy fields created by all those exterior wires and electronics, and they set the house ablaze in luminous

pulses. While the dish antenna spins on its mounting, energized, attempting like a blinded beast—we think—to perceive the source of its disruption.

Then last, and this homes in on the crux of the matter here, our little gathering focuses on omissions concerning the Kanes. Queer gaps in logic. Memory loss. Things that go, a few of us claim with vehemence, beyond the brothers' physical capabilities to alter or eliminate. As if their deletion from the data banks of the world hastens a more concrete and complete transformation, an effacement from the very fabric of our perceptions.

Why do the county highway maps show nothing, not even an unimproved access where the road leads into their place? No square or symbol marks a structure on the paper where Cottonwood Manor stands. Even the land surveyors drop them out, in a geographical mœbius twist, until the abutting properties meet without an acre of Kane soil in the middle.

Why do they slip out of people's thoughts, now, just as easily? Why does the younger generation hear nothing when you mention this family name, and why does the gossip that the middle-aged once loved to embellish leave everyone with expressions blank as snowdrifts? Ted's closest childhood chum talks of himself as a life-long loner. Joel's prom date looks at the red taffeta dress in her closet and frowns. While the service people, the local fuel oil company being an example, seem to recall dealing with them in only the vaguest of terms. True, we few old-timers can picture the family in their minds, and muster a rumor or two about Big Daddy and the eccentricities of his sons, but these memories, in due course, must self-destruct as well. It is part of our aging process.

And as you've guessed, even the members of our club succumb. The three of us meet at noon now, and we have trouble maintaining our focus. We sip decaf for the sake of sipping something hot. Fill our diaries with anecdotes and doodles of skulls and crossbones. At the telescope, we await a glimpse of the frail, hollow-eyed Kanes, and we lose ourselves in sidebar discussions of the Carpetbagger Hypothesis, a theory that the family began this withdrawal after the Civil War. Or the Able Manifesto on the possible biblical roots to their bloodline. Or the popular Equilibria Dilemma, a bit of zen chemistry which argues that it is impossible to differentiate between mind states where we are, one, dreaming up the existence of the brothers, or two, the brothers are undreaming ours. In an attempt at gathering all this to a conclusion—which in its present draft comprises the very document you hold and read—our steady concentration is required. And even our memories are not immune. Just as the bamboo grows in an impenetrable curtain about the brothers' mansion, our thoughts film over. Our beliefs flounder in confusion. Yet there is a lingering retention. A sense of recall transformed, as the Kanes are, into a vivid dream that we . . . ah . . . that we two share each night like sympathetically mind-linked siblings. It is a play of form and shadow in our heads, a flash of passing headlights in our rooms when we sleep.

Here is that dream.

That I will wake one morning after an aurora shimmer in curtains and trails fishhooks of ghostly energy to the earth. And I will remember, briefly, how the cables encrusting Cottonwood Manor shone at midnight, how an immense belt of radiation channeled through the antenna until it wrapped about the manor. Some potency that engulfed its physical mass, exciting the very molecular structure. Something that appeared to scramble its atoms until the light excited everything—blanching all color and form and substance from the main building and the immediate grounds of the estate.

I will stretch and drag myself from bed, yet feel a mysterious purpose drawing me forward. Wordless as a mourner, I will drive again to the plantation, where others I feel I should know are just arriving. I will move down into the gardens of the James River Valley. Part the corn and bamboo before me like an amnesiac seeking

to penetrate, at last, the gray sludge of their forgetfulness. And within the swaying, clacking walls of jade-green shoots will stand a plain square of lush grass. Empty of structures or foundation markings. Neatly clipped. The dew fresh and undisturbed. And I'll feel a ballast of sadness in my heart, but know not whom or what I have lost. My tears will be heartfelt but incomprehensible. I'll sense that somehow, somewhere, there are souls who have achieved a higher purpose in their life, and by doing so, they are absolved of the wrongs they have seen and abetted, the sorry inconsistencies they observed in this world. Finally, I will understand that these souls are swept beyond us—netted and transported elsewhere—and left oh-so-clean inside, clean as a chalkboard from which every mortal equation is erased in preparation for a new language. A new thought. Yes, a new and perfect order of mankind. ♦

The Evolution of "Erasure"

How often do two completely different pieces of fiction, by *different* authors, happen to have the same title? Oh, not that often . . . but it does happen.

How often does *one* author write two pieces of fiction and purposely give each of them the same title? Oh . . . maybe about once every Halley's Comet. It just happened, and you were here to see it.

The story you just read is the second "Erasure" by Bob Frazier to appear in AMAZING® Stories. In the November 1987 issue, the Kanes made their debut (although they weren't mentioned by name) in this piece of verse:

ERASURE

We first took notice when we noticed less:
they stayed in the peeling antebellum manse,
attending no town meetings, or cotillions.
The three misanthropic brothers worked only
as wizards of hack, plucking their histories
from Georgia's data banks, the FBI, IRS,
catalog mailing-lists as far off as Indonesia.
Slowly, the old bamboo patch walled them.
Mail trickled to nothing, like a desert wadi.
Eventually, phone lines they used were dismantled.
On the night they vanished, the auroras danced
in veils of vermilion, sent streamers down like
fishing jigs to touch the dewdropped magnolias.
In the morning we found the grounds seamless
and so green where once the foundation stood.

And now you know why the story seemed so . . . well . . . poetic. ♦

The Galleon Gal

or,
A Pirate's Night of Comfort

Phillip C. Jennings

Buzzard's eye-view: a straight road cutting sere prairie, one car crawling at three mph above the speed limit, a haze of dust trailing off in the wind.

The young man behind the wheel was a tinpot god to scores of local historians eager to appear in print; envied by geezers whose incoherent manuscripts had to be so reworked that "as told to Kirby Volsang" often appeared in the byline.

Envied? The underpaid staff writer for *Our State Heritage* felt profoundly unenviable as he drove toward the old mining town of Hubberton. "Crawl out from under your rock," Bob ordered last Monday, summing up his character in one apt metaphor. "Go thrill some taxpayers."

However muscular and omniscient his prose, Kirby Volsang was a willowy postadolescent, pale and myopic, and he hated these forays into the hearty heartland. The State Historical Society litterateur wielded a motor-pool Oldsmobile with hair-trigger brakes and muttered through the hot noon miles.

Despite air conditioning he continued to sweat. He had that skill, just as he wrinkled miracle-fiber suits within minutes of

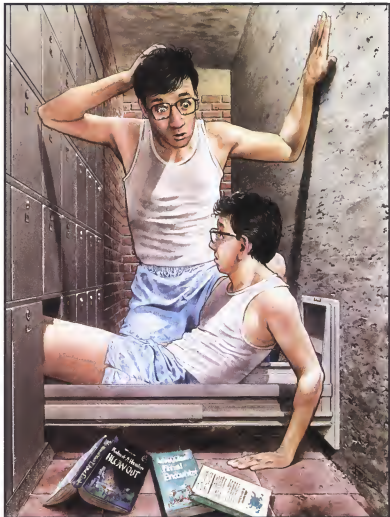


Illustration by Jon Frazee

putting them on. *Thrill some taxpayers?* The mere sight of him would make them vote Republican! Why not send Linda? Why not good ol' backslapping Marv? Kirby measured productivity by words keyed into his desktop terminal; he gladly huddled in his windowless office fifty hours a week. But Bob had been adamant. "Out-state readers always accuse us of urban bias—"

"They want tour prose for the restaurants and motels," Kirby grumbled, replaying Monday in his head.

"I'm as tired of cowboys as anyone," Bob had shot back, tapping the letter. "That's why I want this. Feminism in the New West. They'll love it in Hubberton, they'll love it in the cities. Who can complain?"

Kirby left that question unanswered. *I have a bad attitude, he thought. Time to switch personalities. Put on the fake charm . . . funny how people respect me. State car 293 does the trick. They think it's their fault they haven't heard of me. They're never sure if I'm someone important.*

On Kirby's cheap vinyl briefcase lay the fateful letter, with instructions: Angle left at the light, then cross James Bridge and continue two blocks. Kirby knew it was possible to get lost in towns of five thousand, but the Western Security Bank's profile figured on its letterhead. He felt sure he'd recognize it. Banks weren't as squirreled away as the junkyards that doubled as steam tractor museums.

And so with these assurances he finally relaxed. Alone on this featureless road, he began dreaming of ways to fix *Pirates of the Serenitian Sea*. Of those fifty hours a week Bob admired Kirby for working, only half went into *Our State Heritage*. There were stolen days when the neurasthenic writer *lived* on another world. Could he put details from Western Security Bank into his fantasy novel? Subterranean vaults riddled the ancient city of Amlad, and Kirby liked to steal from reality to make his fictions more plausible.

A useful idea, and Kirby was cheered by the sight of foothills. Road signs boasted the virtues of Leadville and Hubberton. This whole region died in the Depression and again when ore ran out in the fifties. It was just now coming back to life. Dude ranches and ski lodges—an economy of dubious health, fluctuating year to year. Yes, this was the "New West" . . .

. . . Where small-town banks closed at three in the afternoon. Kirby sped on. Time passed faster as the view grew scenic. He reached Hubberton with an hour to spare, crossed the bridge, and parked.

Furtively he checked his zipper, then walked inside. The woman behind the teller window was fifty and kittenish, an unnerving combination. She gave Kirby a dimpled smile.

He cleared his throat. "I'm looking for a Ms. Lejune? I've got this, uh, letter—"

"Mr. Volsang? We've been expecting you."

Kittenish Mrs. Flaum led Kirby through a space knocked out of the Western Security Bank's wall and into an annex, once the building next door. He saw two desks. At one of them a pinstriped figure rose. . . .

Ms. Lejune "dressed for success" in mannish clothes

and power colors. Unfortunately, Hubberton's stores did not provide much range of choices; then too she was *paleolithically* female. The combination of hand-tailored navy pantsuit and Venus of Willendorf body made her look like an overweight Tiny Tim, androgynous from the opposite direction. To top it off she had an airhead's high soprano voice.

But Ms. Lejune was no airhead. Within minutes she was lecturing to Kirby, who sat shielded behind his notebook. "So, seeing Mr. Carlevan had lost interest in the daily operations of the bank, in nineteen sixty-three we pooled our resources—"

"Mr. Carlevan?" Kirby flipped back through his notes. "You said he died in thirty-eight."

"That was the *old* Mr. Carlevan. I'm talking about his son." Ms. Lejune swung her chair and the floor creaked. She pointed at an oil portrait of vapidly incarnate, Rudy Vallee hair and unfocused eyes. "People say he was two suits short of a full deck, but it often happens children don't like their fathers' businesses. We were flattered by the trust young Carlevan showed us, but was he a progressive thinker, willing to let us graduate into partnership and buy him out, or was he just up in the clouds with all this time-capsule foolishness?"

"Time capsules?" Kirby scribbled the words.

"I'm getting off track. Well, after I tell you what we women have done to get Hubberton growing again—"

At three Mrs. Flaum locked the door and drew the blinds. Bags were secured, ledgers were carried into the great gleaming vault—which was anything but subterranean. Kirby let Ms. Lejune steer him through the 1970s. Inspired by the bustle, she rose to pace. "When the junior Carlevan finally died—"

"Uh, yes," Kirby made a feeble show of independence. "About those time capsules—"

Ms. Lejune turned and loomed, spilling massively into Kirby's personal space. "Look, I wouldn't want too much made of his hobby. I don't want him lampooned. It doesn't make us look good."

She backed off. Kirby breathed again as she continued. "We indulged him. We let him come into the bank and use the basement long after he'd forfeited any rights to do so. Harmless pottering, but you could make us look heedless about security."

"Oh, no," Kirby's voice cracked and he tried again. "You'll preview anything I write. Mr. Carlevan's just a peripheral figure to our article, but the Historical Society tries to keep tabs on time capsules. We could do a second piece in a later issue if Carlevan's work seems promising."

In truth the key word here was "basement." This bank did have subterranean aspects! Kirby had sat four hours in the car and his butt was too bony to endure Ms. Lejune's hard guest chair. Here was a chance to poke around and steal details for *Pirates of the Serenitian Sea*.

And so Kirby stood, amazed at his effrontery. His unfolding pressed Ms. Lejune into a two-step retreat. "I need a break. Maybe you could show me around the bank, and then we can get"—he looked at his watch—

"back to work, unless you'd prefer to pick things up next morning?"

She shrugged and obliged him. His upstairs tour took two minutes. This wing of the bank doubled as the real estate/insurance office: The original half was given over to tellers, vault, and a private room labeled CONFERENCE. A corridor ran along the vault. It led to a tiny alcove with a coat tree and two doors, LADIES and MEN.

Ms. Lejune opened MEN and lumbered downstairs. Kirby woke to her sacrifice. As an inevitable consequence of his curiosity and her dimensions, her vast haunch banged into the wall: bump, bump, bump. Her suit grew daubed with dust. Worse was the prospect of ascending these stairs again—she was already breathing hard. Kirby cast eyes left and right to give her privacy as she brushed and recovered her wind.

"This must be under the upstairs vault," he spoke, waving at a massive floor-to-ceiling buttress of concrete. "Strong enough to support quite a few tons." Finding it impossible to comment about the toilet and shelves lining the wall, Kirby bent to study this phenomenon. "It was put in after the basement was built. You had another vault at one time?"

"Down that passage," Ms. Lejune answered. "A safe upstairs for daily business, and this downstairs bit for safety deposit boxes. Take a look. Those are your time capsules."

Before the concrete pediment was built, it had been easy to get where she was pointing. Now, for anyone wider than Kirby it was impossible. Thinking of *Pirates of the Serenitan Sea*, the would-be fantasy writer squeezed down the cobwebbed slit. He turned into a slightly more open dogleg. The place was dark and dusty, with locked gunmetal drawers along the rear wall.

"Back in the forties the circus came to Hubberton by train, and set up by the tracks JUST BEHIND THESE BUILDINGS," Ms. Lejune called invisibly from thirty feet away, apparently uncertain how far she should raise her voice.

"You see how Carlevan's old vault extends back from the building? In nineteen forty-nine when the circus moved on, the dirt was disturbed underneath the freak show tent. Some roustabouts tried to DIG THEIR WAY IN! The bank contacted everyone with valuables, to make sure they were safe. That's when young Carlevan decided to put in the new vault. He used the empty boxes from the old one for his TIME CAPSULES."

"I'd need keys, a special key for each box," Kirby responded. "You say they extend to the rear?"

"Ten-foot-long trays, with boxes end to end inside. Like I say, there's NOTHING IN THEM now. Nothing but Carlevan's collections of odd bits from the dime store."

"A pretty weird arrangement," Kirby said as he wriggled back to her side, squinting beneath the glow of a 60-watt bulb.

Ms. Lejune started up the stairs, using conversation to disguise the fact that at her weight she had to climb toddler fashion; up-step, up-step. "When banks put in new vaults they don't always get rid of the old ones. They

use both, but not if the old one's compromised. We can't even sell it for scrap. It's built into the bank's foundations."

"So who's got the keys?" Kirby asked, giving her a chance to continue her face-saving performance.

Under the circumstances, she was sure to answer. "We've got them here. Upstairs. Do you want . . . to open one of the trays and take a look?"

"I'll need a flashlight," Kirby answered nervously. *Ob, please, don't faint on me!*

"Tomorrow, then." She reached the top of the stairs, her face mottled from the effort. "I'll bring one to work. You staying at the Best Western?"

"The Starlite. What's a good place to eat?" No matter how blind to his nerdishness, an unmarried woman fifteen years older than himself was hardly likely to invite Kirby home for supper.

"The Cafe Commercial just down the street. The one with the Trailways sign out front."

Two hours later Kirby braved the evening for Commercial chicken and fries. He returned to the Starlite and reviewed his notes. For him it had been an eventful day. Images tumbled in his mind as he settled into bed. For a time he tossed, irritated by the buzz-blink of the Starlite's pink neon sign. At last he got up. Eleven-thirty. Plenty of time to go to a bar and pickle his brain, elbowed by gun-happy wilderness Aryans, bikers in studded leather, drunken slackwits from Hubberton Junior College . . .

Kirby went back to bed and shut his eyes. "*Call me Janice*," Ms. Lejune murmured sweetly as she rounded her desk. To his embarrassment Kirby was naked, but it didn't bother her. "*I know a place we can go work on your notes.*"

Kirby woke when a freight train clattered through town. At five in the morning someone ran a bath in the unit behind his bed. Now that it had his attention, his gut's struggles with Cafe Commercial chicken escalated into war. Kirby dragged up to spend an hour on the can. From all his flushing the neighbor must have supposed he had a wife and four children. Kirby peeped through the curtain and watched the man leave. Only then did he dare emerge for breakfast.

After visiting McDonald's he bought gas and parked. At eight thirty he left his tinted-glass fortress and followed Ms. Lejune into the bank, ready to earn his meager salary.

Had he invaded her dreams as she'd done his? She seemed cheery this morning, victor in any duel of nocturnal id. Kirby opened his briefcase. "I've got just a few questions."

She answered them and told him how to spell some names. At last Kirby closed his notebook. "Now, about those keys . . ."

Ms. Lejune bent half out of view. She hobbled up with keys and tags in a mare's-nest heap. She pulled a flashlight from a huge canvas purse. "It occurs to me that if Carlevan's work impresses you—well, that means he was competent in something. And that might affect how you portray him in our article."

Kirby nodded. "Not that we'd insult him, not even if it turns out, uh . . ."

"Exactly. And as a taxpayer I sure don't mind you getting two stories out of one trip." She smiled and rose. "You know the way?"

"No problem." Clutching briefcase, keys, and flashlight, his glasses half-slipped down his nose, Kirby turned for the door to subterranean mystery. If this foray took an hour, he could certainly make it home to the city in time to return the car. Not enough time for a true story, but enough to get Bob to send Linda or Marv on a followup mission.

The keys came in two kinds. The bigger ones fit the locks on the wall. Kirby opened one and slid out the tray. It rolled smoothly a third of its length, then rrammed into the concrete pediment.

There were boxes inside, but one or two were missing so they weren't jammed tight. Kirby picked up the first, then fumbled through the smaller keys, and found number 12-2. He opened the box, set the lid aside, and aimed his flashlight.

Under a hymnal—a pile of *Salomon* comic books? Kirby paged through the adventures of an Israeli superhero, defending grateful Bedouin from the machinations of the evil Saudis. He frowned. Any comic series must be obscure if he hadn't heard of it. How did a boon-docks banker get hold of a collection like this?

There was more: a rubber stamp with Carlevan's name and address, a photograph of someone in uniform standing by a '49 Harris Speedabout. Kirby's frown deepened. He picked up a paperback; *The Shadow's Length* by C. S. Lewis.

Something not right. Kirby couldn't vouch for Lewis's other writings, but this was adult "scientification" and he could have sworn no such title existed.

Time to look in the envelopes.

News clippings. "Adenauer Assassinated in W. Germany." "Viet Minh Surrender to French." "Brooklyn Takes World Series." "President Dewey Makes Supreme Court Appointment."

President Dewey? The guy who'd lost to Truman? Kirby looked for a place to sit. Failing that, he slumped against the wall.

What a colossal joke! How many hours to perpetrate all these frauds? Why? To throw historians of the future into utter confusion?

How could Carlevan have hoped to fake C. S. Lewis's style? Perhaps *The Shadow's Length* was unpublishable. Perhaps it was a fake cover pasted over a real novel.

Kirby made his decision. He snapped open his briefcase and dropped *The Shadow's Length* inside. Then he unlocked box 12-3. He found a set of risqué salt-and-pepper shakers, a hunk of mummified fruitcake, and a carton of tree ornaments crayoned: "WE CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS HERE TOO."

Under the carton he found *Fugitive* by John Vance (not Jack?) and *Red Menace* by Dash Hammett. Just to screw things up Carlevan stuck in *The Martian Chronicles* by Ray Bradbury; genuine cover, but perhaps he'd toyed with the stories.

All this and some copies of *Life* magazine, but Kirby decided not to bulk up his briefcase. He knew genre fiction better than cars and baseball. A dozen paperbacks would tell him everything. They'd give him grounds for an exposé big enough to fetch him a journalist's reputation, and too bad if Ms. Lejune didn't like it.

He shut the two boxes and slid the tray home. Grimly he hefted his heavy briefcase up the stairs. Ten minutes to return keys and flashlight, and he was on his way. Across James Bridge, through the light—escape with the evidence!

Escape with stolen property. As the miles rolled on Kirby reverted to nervous bureaucrat. Ms. Lejune dealt with him professional to professional, but Bob was another matter. What would Bob say about an unauthorized "sequestration" of materials?

Bob didn't have to know, not until Kirby had made a complete assessment of his booty. His? And why not? Carlevan was dead, any heirs long satisfied with their portions. Stuff left in the bank's hands belonged . . . to the bank? To Ms. Lejune? In the back of Kirby's head, a lawyer stood up and began a speech: She could make no practical use of property she was too fat to reach, hence on the ancient principle of *flumdim boodwinkus* she was out of the running. . . .

Lawyers could defend him after the fact.

More hours, more miles. Highway 12 passed car lots and condos, oil tanks and foundries. Kirby reached the city, and finally the capitol precincts, where the State Historical Society building loomed in gray granite. The motor pool was a block away; he dropped off the Oldsmobile and slid into his Karmann Ghia. He looked at his watch. Why not just go home? It was almost quitting time anyhow.

Kirby pulled into traffic. Twenty minutes later he reached 3837 Oak. Outdoor stairs took him to the second floor. Inside lay his bed, fridge, TV, and three thousand paperbacks. Ignoring his empty stomach, Kirby opened his briefcase, took out *The Shadow's Length*, and began to read.

Demonic forces conspired to conquer England, routed when a coven of Christians raised the king's standard in an atavistic gesture which nevertheless had the desired consequence: all this in a "future" plausible in the forties, drab, bureaucratic, no computers. Lewis, all right; or the world's most painstaking forgery. Perhaps the work was forgotten when overtaken by events; suppressed after the king's death?

Kirby looked up. Too late for the libraries, but Dreamwind Bookstore was still open. He called. "I'd like to find a copy of *The Shadow's Length* by C. S. Lewis."

Pause. "Excuse me, let's just look that one up."

After a minute the clerk returned to the phone. "You sure it's fiction? Lewis did some academic stuff."

"How far would you go before swearing no such book exists?"

"Well . . . British, small hardcover editions—"

"Macmillan, paperback."

"Nope. You want me to swear? No Macmillan."

Kirby shivered with a mix of emotions. "How about *Fugitive* by John Vance?"

"I've got a customer. Hold a minute, okay?"

Kirby pawed through his briefcase and laid his plunder on the bed, title by title. "Hello?" he repeated when he heard someone fumble with the receiver. "*Fugitive*? Published nineteen forty-nine?"

"Another miss," came the response. "I'd be happy to help you, but maybe you should come work through our shelves. Your problems aren't easy to handle, and I've got all these customers."

"Okay," Kirby relented. He hung up and stared at a row of covers. After a time he reached for *Fugitive*, and began to read.

Hours passed. Kirby plopped a can of tamales into a saucepan. He found a Coke and sipped, barely conscious of his surroundings until the tamales began to scorch. Short of sleep and nourished by cayenne pepper, his mind wandered in new directions. Item: He was holding a book that didn't exist, a clever, wonderful book that made *Pirates of the Serenitian Sea* seem leaden in comparison. Item: Unlike *The Shadow's Length*, this book was timeless, undated by the pass of decades.

Item: Not counting *Our State Heritage*, Kirby Volsang was an as-yet-unpublished writer.

Fugitive, by . . . Kirby Volsang? At twenty-five hours a week he could get a manuscript typed and ready to send off in two months. Another six months for a publisher to discover this gem in his slush pile. Meanwhile he'd process a few more, preparing to burst spectacularly onto the science-fiction scene.

Then what? Jack Vance might read *Fugitive*. He'd look for an old shoebox and pull out a novel he'd never finished; identical sentences, the same names . . .

What was going on? Out in Hubberton Kirby found a literary goose sitting on a pile of golden eggs. What was the story behind that? Yawning, he paged through his notes:

Circus, freak show, disturbed earth. *Dammit, what would a normal brain make of these things?* Surely there was a more reasonable explanation than the one that sprang to a mind nourished on science fiction.

A voyager from an alternate Earth, perhaps the world of President Dewey—no, from an alternate Earth so far removed that he seemed freakish, hence he'd taken cover in a circus sideshow. A voyager who came here to find something. Having made his acquisition, he set up his gizmo to return that buried cargo to his own reality.

Problem: Afterward he wasn't around to turn his gizmo off, and it kept radiating, softening the boundaries between dozens and hundreds of alternate Earths. Its sphere of influence reached the bank's basement vault, and that influence worked through time. Objects soaked it up until they were "hot" enough to jump into the next reality.

Finding an "attempted tunnel" echoed on a dozen parallel Earths, a dozen young Carlevans summoned customers to check their safety deposit boxes. Even though they acted quickly, they saw strange deeds signed by the wrong officials, wills itemizing imaginary

estates and making provision for nonexistent relatives. A terrible embarrassment, but somehow they covered it up. Emptying out the basement vault seemed to help, but after so many handshakes and grateful promises and sleepless nights Mr. Carlevan began to hate banking.

Gradually he'd sold out, escaping any further responsibility. Meanwhile he experimented with this strange phenomenon. Using time capsules as an excuse, he and his Carlevan brothers loaded the boxes with books and trinkets, and set up an exchange among themselves.

But not for profit. And decades later, they were dead.

Kirby opened a second Coke. Yes, most all those Carlevans would be dead. On the other hand, each of umpteen universes had its own Kirby Volsang.

Most of those Kirbys would be like him, too timid to steal the unknown works of known authors. Well and good, forget *Fugitive*. If Kirby's radiation theory were correct, box 12-4 would be a little more outré, shifted further from home than 12-3. The deeper he plundered, the more likely he'd come on a masterpiece with no affiliations whatever. That's what he'd take, and leave *Ringworld* and *Gaudy Night* and *Lyonese* as offerings to his unknown benefactor.

All this was (yawn) very well and good, but . . . but . . .

Kirby sagged. Later he blinked back to life, slugged down a mouthful of warm Coke, swept off most of his bed, set the clock and fell back to sleep. Habit carried him along after the alarm rang. Zombie-eyed and wearing a shirt spattered by tamale juices, he shuffled into the Historical Society building and lurched downstairs to work.

He dropped into place behind his desk and laid loving hands on his keyboard. Soon he'd roughed out a story based on his Hubberton notes. Time to polish it later. This way left his mind free to muse on last night's theories.

To check them out he'd have to go back to Hubberton. On what excuse? Any mention of time capsules would turn a profitable secret into a tourist attraction. Worse, if theory #2 was true, all sorts of government scientists would show up to elbow him aside!

Theory #1, Mr. Carlevan was capable of forging works by any number of writers, printing single copies and then hiding them for reasons unknown.

Theory #2, the alternate worlds idea.

Theory #3? Theory #3 was the one that made sense. Theory #3 was the theory Kirby might come up with, if #2 hadn't mesmerized his attention like that of a cobra with a mouse. *This is what being dumb feels like*, Kirby thought. *Truth lies beyond my grasp.*

Forget theories. How to get to Hubberton? In eight years working for Bob, Kirby had never once volunteered for field research. What excuse could explain his sudden urge to hit the road? *Remember, it has to be at taxpayer expense. Ms. Lejune won't let just anybody into the bank's basement.*

He got an idea. After inspecting it from all angles he edged out of his refuge and knocked at Bob's door.

"Come in."

"This picture won't do," Kirby announced, thrusting into a room glorious with windows. He dropped a group shot of the employees of Western Security Bank on Bob's desk. "It's totally pedestrian."

"Pedestrian" was one of Bob's words. "They sent it themselves," Bob answered.

"Who wants to look at fourteen strangers lined up in a row? Besides, it makes Ms. Lejune look fat."

Bob studied the picture and found this last assertion undeniably true. "Yeah, well—"

"Linda's on vacation," Kirby rushed on. "I guess I'll have to drive back to Hubberton and take some new shots." He tried to sound reluctant, but something rang false.

Bob looked up. "You?"

Kirby shrugged. "They know me. It's more efficient this way."

"You should have taken a camera your first trip." Bob glanced back to the photograph. Slowly a grin spread across his face. "Why, you old devil! Ms. Lejune? Going to pay her another visit, eh?"

Kirby went through life with an invisible "Tease me" sign on his back. His coworkers loved to speculate over his nonexistent romances. He was about to stammer an indignant denial when it occurred to him that this time Bob's fantasies might come in useful.

"She happens to be a very nice woman," he answered, watching Bob's eyes widen. "Hubberton's pretty scenic. I think I can catch that for our statewide readership."

"Ah." Another pause. "Well, let's see; our budget for trips and expenses . . ."

Bob dragged out a computer listing. Kirby knew the battle was won. The coup de grace: "If I have to use my own car, I guess that'll be okay."

Bob looked up again, searching for lines in an ad lib play gone out of control. "Well then, I'd better tell them you're coming. Uh . . . Monday?"

Could Kirby hang fire through a whole weekend? He nodded while making an inward resolution. He'd drive up this afternoon and ask questions around town. Maybe there'd be gossip about Mr. Carlevan's oddities, and new perspectives on that circus.

After clearing a few final hurdles, he returned to his tiny office and messed with the Lejune bank piece. Just before noon he signed out a camera. After a long hike to state employee lot B he drove off, reconciled to seeing all the Highway 12 landmarks three times in one week, and growing hungrier and hungrier on the way.

All Jessica Fletcher did in *Murder, She Wrote* was stroll by the camera. People eagerly blurted clues. Real life wasn't that easy. Kirby envisioned himself, ears wide, in some back booth at the Cafe Commercial, hardly unobtrusive in a town where he was a stranger. That's what he'd do, but as God was his witness, given his bout with the chicken, he'd never eat there again!

No, after crossing the state to Hubberton he played safe and took the drive-through at McDonald's. As he cranked down the window to grab his styrofoamed food, a Cadillac honked behind him. He turned and Ms. Lejune waved.

An emphatically friendly Ms. Lejune. Kirby waved back. She called out: "Park over there!"

He did, then got out of the Ghia and waited, sipping his Coke. After taking on cargo from the McDonald's window, the Cadillac pulled up. "Small world, huh? Your car or mine?" Ms. Lejune asked.

The decision was obvious. Kirby doubted she could squeeze into a Ghia's passenger seat. He grabbed his bag and joined her—was Ms. Lejune a *janice* after working hours? "Your editor called me," she told him as he slid in. Her grin broadened, her cheeks dimpled as she unboxed her first Big Mac.

"Uh, yeah. I brought a camera. Too." Kirby's language fell apart. "Did you mention those time capsules?"

"He did most of the talking." Ms. Lejune imbued her words with significance. "It really was sweet of you to come."

Kirby went numb; the effects of astonishment weren't just literary hyperbole. Socially inept, he found it impossible to fathom how Bob could joke with Ms. Lejune. How could he tell a woman he'd never met that "Our young Kirby has the hots for you" without arousing anger, or at least disgust? Nevertheless he'd done so. That much was obvious.

And now Janice Lejune was signaling broad and clear that if he was attracted to her, he was welcome to pursue his interests!

What did men do with women? Specifically, what did they do in Hubberton after work on Friday? Waving his fries, Kirby attempted an urbanity: "So what's fun here?"

She avalanched closer and patted his knee. "I'm afraid bankers have to be discreet. No boozing, no bowling, not even penny poker. It's like being in the ministry."

"I wonder about *this*, then," Kirby mumbled through a mouthful of burger.

"Business," Ms. Lejune shrugged. "It is business, isn't it? You have your camera, you're in your office clothes, and if you follow me into the bank encumbered by all that stuff—well, who'd guess there's a bottle of Southern Comfort in my desk?"

"What about alarms? I might learn the secrets—"

"Oh, Kirby!" she giggled. "May I call you Kirby? I know you well enough, I think. There are two kinds of men—but I don't think I can tell *that* particular story until I've had one or two Comforts."

"Ah." Kirby buried himself in the business of eating. Trapped! Trapped like a fly in a Ms. Lejune's web, but at least he'd get into the bank!

Then what? There was a woman-rapes-man scene in Chapter Ten of *Pirates of the Serenitian Sea*, a comic interlude. Comic? The prospect of orgy around on the bank's carpeted floor . . . no, it was unimaginable. Janice's smiles and words gave him ideas, but for Kirby those ideas never came true. He could always depend on his nerdishness.

That being the case, he even dared encourage her. "I bet you have some interesting stories to tell," he responded. "I'm a good listener, and I promise they won't show up in *Our State Heritage*."

Janice smiled significantly, all she could do with her mouth full. *Time out*, she signed like a basketball referee, and picked up her second Big Mac.

Which suggested the topic of sports. Kirby feigned interest in Janice Lejune's high school basketball career. By the time she finished with the state class A semifinals she was also done eating. Kirby got into his car and tailed her to the bank.

6:23, the bank sign blinked. *Temp 63*. "It's never right," his hostess complained, and unlocked the door. Like a charging rhino, Janice lunged for what looked like a fuse box, unlocked that too, and punched four numbers on a keypad. "There," she puffed. "That keeps Jim out of our hair; good luck he's used to my working late. Now what? Glasses in the ladies' room—want to wash them out? Want a few candid shots of the Executive Veep with her vest unbuttoned?"

Kirby reddened and forced his grimace into a smile. False though it felt, it must have looked like a leer. Janice leered back as she straightened up with her desk's Southern Comfort. Too much! Kirby fled to the ladies' room. After washing two glasses, he leaned his brow against the mirror's cool surface and prayed against the inevitability of fate.

Grimly he turned and marched out to face the future.

How many years of thighs the size of oil drums before once-slim women athletes give up trying to cross their legs? Janice was perched on her desk in alternate position, ankle on knee, shoes kicked off and toes wiggling happily. Kirby offered her the glasses; she poured, and then raised her drink in a toast: "Confusion to the French!"

They clinked and drank. "You didn't tell Bob about those time capsules, then? I'm keeping them secret. It's going to be a surprise."

Janice dredged her memory and shook her head. "You two must have an interesting relationship. Bob's the other kind of man—remember what I told you?"

Kirby remembered. Sometime in this evening's decay toward intimacy he was going to hear a story. He swallowed another swig of Comfort. Could the process be reversed? Few women warmed to his explanations of how the Saxons invaded Britain, with digressions into German versus Celtic agriculture. If he could steer things toward history . . . "What's your favorite form of literature?"

"Romance," Janice purred. "Man meets woman, woman meets man. Of different worlds, their love triumphs over all misunderstandings and they flower—together!"

Touché. Kirby glugged down the last of his Comfort. Unused to alcohol, he worked to keep his eyes in focus. The part of his brain that dealt with background shut down, leaving Janice looming large in front, great billows of her . . . like a ship? Women and ships . . . top-gallant breasts, fifty inches of belt dividing topsail stomach from course-abdomen: a broad-sterned galleon to be boarded by the master of the *Pirates of the Serentian Sea*!

I'm going to lose my virginity tonight, I'd better make the best of my seductress, Kirby decided. He held out his

glass. "Different worlds, huh? Has anyone ever written you a poem? I mean, an original poem? I'm thinking of a poem."

Damn, he sounded drunk even to himself! Janice heaved closer and poured two more drinks. "Once when I was a little girl I ran into a couple classmates after school: Ray and his shy friend Willie. Ray waved a deck of cards. He suggested we three sneak into the unfinished part of the church basement and play strip poker."

Kirby blinked.

"Being the girl I was, I didn't need much persuading. Either it was bad luck, or Ray kept changing the rules so I'd lose; anyhow, it wasn't ten minutes before I was naked, with the two of them still in their clothes."

"In the full spirit of scientific inquiry, Ray tried this and that on me, while Willie stood in the background. I could tell he was puzzled. He couldn't figure out why I just lay there and let Ray do these things. Do you know why?"

Kirby shook his head.

"That's because you're like Willie," Janice continued. "And it's a sad story—not that I got into trouble. But if Ray had been alone I'd never have gone into that church basement. It was Willie I was interested in, shy Willie who just stood there, and he never knew."

Janice leaned closer and gave Kirby a kiss. By now he was ready, at least intellectually. Clumsily he slid his arm across her shoulders . . . uh . . . ah—Oh, Gaawwwd!

Boom!

When three hundred pounds of overbalanced flesh sweeps a person to the floor, fight-or-fee instincts take over, the more easily if the victim's brain is working at one-quarter efficiency. "Are you all right?" Janice asked, rolling to starboard to help a panicked Kirby wriggle free. "Ooof! Don't kick now! Are you okay?"

Kirby clawed backward, his fragile nerves shattered. He reached the wall and gasped, then carefully pulled up onto his feet.

"You poor boy!" Janice giggled. "It was an accident, really it was! Oh, you are another Willie!" She rumped up onto hands and knees, grabbed her desk, then stood. "Where were we?"

"Ahh, not so good. I think I've broken . . ." Kirby's face shifted with thought. Elaborate schemes were hard to carry off when boozy, but just maybe . . . "I think we'd better wait and see. I've got this recurring thing with my knee, but we can't go to a doctor reeking of Southern Comfort. Anyhow, most of the time it snaps back on its own."

"Damn," Janice swore. "That's shot the mood, hasn't it?"

"You wouldn't mind waiting?" Kirby responded. "I mean, I was really looking forward, uh . . ."

Janice was already touching herself up, patting hair into place, brushing her sleeves, scanning the floor for two missing buttons. "You think you'll be okay?"

Kirby moved with ginger care. "I think so," he answered through heroically clenched jaws. "I guess we

could use the time to take pictures. No, my hands are too shaky."

A pregnant pause. "If you can manage the stairs, you could take another look at those time capsules," Janice suggested, looking at him with sweet indulgence.

Victory! It was easy for Kirby to nod wordlessly, letting Janice cluck about: nursing, joking, fetching him the keys. Maybe she sensed that Carlewan's time capsules were important: now she was offering them as bait to cheer him up. As he limped for the stairs, Kirby wondered about enlisting her as a fellow conspirator.

"I'll borrow the light bulb out of the ladies' room," Janice offered. "You'll find an old socket down around the bend."

Kirby opened MEN and flipped the light switch. There was a Presence Below; nighttime basements were always spooky. Janice noticed his hesitation: "Can you manage the stairs with your knee?"

"Sure," Kirby answered distractedly, forgetting his injured act. In response to this verbal nudge, he started down the stairs.

"Wait," Janice ordered. The door shut; there were thumps and grunts. It opened again. "Here's the bulb. I'll be down in a minute."

The Things of Darkness retreated as Kirby wriggled into the slit passage. He found a dead bulb in an old socket, replaced it, and was dazzled by its sudden glow.

Now what?

Get the booty out of those boxes. Do that and he'd no longer depend on Janice Lejune and her keys. *Nothing wrong with Janice*, he apologized to his conscience, *but theft and copyright infringement are solitary crimes. No, I'm protecting her.* . . .

From around the dogleg he heard muffled creaks; Janice descending the stairs. Kirby stuck the first key into the first lock, and got to work. Box 1-1, no fiction, just an atlas, a thesaurus and the *Yale Dictionary of Quotations*?

Box 1-2, *Captain Bracegirdle* by C. S. Forester, with two similarly mutated sex stories. "Sounds like you're busy," Janice called. "Time for another drink?"

"Uh, no, not right now. Let me just finish this tray here." Kirby winced. No time to exercise discretion, just fetch out *every book he found* and go through them later. Box 1-3, 1-5, 1-6 . . .

Had he been sober, there still would have been noise. As it was, on a scale ranging from methodical inventory to open plunder he was audibly on the plunder end. It was embarrassing, and Janice was curious. "Funny how this layout amplifies sound," Kirby shouted to appease her. "And I'm a little clumsy, but don't worry. I'm not doing any damage."

In truth he was tossing paperbacks just anyhow into the cul-de-sac behind him, and piling the metal boxes into a precarious stack. Good; now for drawer 2.

The biggest drawers with the biggest boxes lay along the bottom. Kirby began with them to get maximum benefit from the least fiddling with keys. "I'm feeling better," he shouted as he lifted the lid from 2-2. "I'm afraid this is boring for you, though. Let me cut this

short as soon as I get to a good breaking point."

"That's fine," Janice answered politely, in a tone of voice that said, "*Hurry!*"

Box 2-3, 2-4 . . . the stack of discards began to lean. Kirby tried to straighten them . . . *Crash!*

"It's okay, I'm okay, ulp—awg!" As Kirby wrestled boxes back into order, he heard Janice giggling in the boxes. Vials and whatnots had tumbled out of 1-7. He picked up a tube of little blue pills labeled INTELLIGENCE.

"Probably lethal in combination with alcohol," he muttered. "Intelligence? If I were smart, I'd empty all the bottom trays first, *then* open the boxes."

Yes, that way he could speed things, and get to Janice before she cooled off and got suspicious. Drawer 3 . . . Drawer 4 . . . "Pretty soon now!" he shouted.

Drawer 5 . . . Drawer 6. Kirby stood wheezing, appalled at the havoc he'd wreaked. He kicked the last drawer back into place, turned, and began making his way down the slit.

Janice stood there holding an empty bottle, smiling in her vast pink immensity. "Just you and me, Kirby," she spoke. "I seem to have this thing about getting naked in basements. Let's see if you care to take up where little Willie left off."

Kirby felt torn in two. *Sex on cold linoleum with a globular female!* But it was sex, the real thing, with a real human being!

A freak! No, the most powerful woman in town, intelligent, and—*Aw, jeez. Can I run? She's got the stairs blocked off, and nowhere else to go.*

Grimacing sheepishly, Kirby walked into Janice Lejune's smothering embrace.

Much later: the sound of distant hammering. Kirby raised his head. "Shaddup," he mumbled, and slid back into his drowse.

More pounding. "Uh . . . the door?" Janice mumbled.

Kirby stumbled to his feet. None of the books he'd read had told him sex was like this, with an aftermath like an opium dream. He felt simultaneously light and heavy, and tremendously *accomplished*.

The sounds came from behind the concrete pediment. "Don't worry," Kirby whispered as he pulled on his shorts. "It's probably some wind-up toy."

He slithered down the narrow corridor. "*Open the door! There's no more oxygen in here!*" The voice was muffled, panicked and familiar.

Kirby found the key and turned it in the lock. Tray 6 zoomed open, pushed by the pale gasping creature inside. The fellow flopped free and drew blinking to his feet. "I'm Kirby Volsang," he announced. "Tell me, has it happened yet? Janice on the stairs?"

"What do you mean?" Kirby answered. "How'd you get here?"

"How do you think?" The two Kirbys faced each other, both in underwear. "The same way those books did," the new arrival continued. "There was this circus sideshow—"

"I know all that. Theory #2, right?"

The other Kirby took a moment to suck air. "Yeah. Whoever planted that alternate-universes gizmo used it

to travel between realities himself, so I knew it was possible for living people to make the trip. Only I didn't have much time to bask in its influence, maybe just five minutes, so our realities are undoubtedly a lot alike.

Look, tell Janice not to climb those stairs!"

"WHAT'S GOING ON?" Janice called. "WHO ARE YOU TALKING TO?"

"IT'S A RADIO," Kirby answered. "Okay, what's with the stairs?"

"In my reality they collapse under her. Janice naked, no way of getting out before Monday morning when her colleagues show up for work—It's going to destroy her career!"

"So you *abandoned* her?"

"And my career too. The way I see it, it's less compromising if I'm not there. Besides, I'm part of your rescue force. If your stairs *do* collapse, Janice and I can hike you onto my shoulders and get you up."

Thump. Thump-thump. "Open the drawer!"

Kirby grabbed the key to drawer 5, and the tray shot open. "Hi! I'm Kirby Volsang, just like you. You won't believe this, but—"

"I believe you," Kirby answered. "You're going to help me with the stairs?"

"Stairs? I gotta tell you, Janice Lejune—in *my* reality she's out there, mother-naked and a wicked gleam in her eye. Talk about weird scenes!"

"You came here to escape?" the other Kirby asked. "You risked suffocation?"

"Sheer stupidity. I figured I was heap brave explorer, and then the drawer clicked shut and it was too late—Where am I? Is this where Dewey was elected president?"

"KIRBY?" Janice shouted. "I'M GETTING DRESSED. SOUNDS LIKE YOU'RE HAVING A CONVENTION IN THERE!"

"Oh, God! She'll go upstairs for her clothes!"

Before Kirby could stop him, Tray 6 Kirby thrust down the corridor. "Careful!" he cried, and then stopped short. "This isn't the same stairs. It's all new."

Janice stopped and did a double-take as Kirby followed himself into the room. "Now you've blown it," Kirby growled.

"I'm not going back into the vault," 6 Kirby answered. "I'm not taking that risk again. I'm here now, and you've got to do something about me."

More thumping and hammering. Kirby slumped back against the pediment. "Janice," he spoke weakly, "will you marry me? It looks like there's going to be a small army of Kirbys pretty soon, and I want to be the one that lives with you."

"This is . . . all . . . kind of . . . sudden," Janice answered, while 6 Kirby cut around her to climb up the stairs.

He came down again with her clothes. "It's him or me," he said. "The other Kirby's a jerk when it comes to women."

"I think there's two of them now," Kirby spoke weakly. "I hear conversation." He raised his voice. "WHAT'S GOING ON?"

"I HAD TO COME, SHE HAD ME TRAPPED. SHE WAS GO-

ING TO KILL ME. THOSE WERE HER VERY WORDS! ONLY SHE DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT THE CAPSULES, SO I THOUGHT—"

Kirby rolled his eyes as his alter ego suddenly fell silent. "He took longer to get here. That means he's far from farther away," he explained to Janice. She stared at him. "His Janice is less like you, or else he pissed you off. Please, Janice, don't let it be that way for us. Don't let all this get you mad, because I didn't mean for it to happen. I can understand that maybe now you want me out of your life—"

5 Kirby and—4 Kirby?—slipped down the corridor. "We've got her outnumbered," one said.

"This is a fine woman, and I won't tolerate any insults," 6 Kirby responded. "Now you two are fully dressed, so I want you to load up with books and take them out to my Rabbit—"

"It's a Karmann Ghia," Kirby interrupted.

"His Karmann Ghia. Then get inside. One of you undress and the other bring his clothes inside so I can wear something, then me and our host can get out there with more books."

"And the camera," Kirby took over. "Everything back to normal. Janice, these people are my disaster, not yours. I promise we'll get out of your hair, but then afterward?"

Janice tilted her head toward the slit. "You sure there's no more Kirbys coming tonight?"

"I figure most of us had a good time with most of you, just like here. Ours is just one reality, see, and the closer ones are very similar to ours. . . ." Kirby launched into the details of his idea of alternate worlds. "So that circus gizmo energizes objects into a higher state of reality—"

"Actually, it probably steals energy so they drop one level, and uses that energy to keep running," 5 Kirby interrupted.

"You know, you're a real dork," Kirby responded.

Three Kirbys laughed, and Janice's shoulders sagged as some of the tension went out of her. "What are you going to do with yourselves?" she asked.

"One's got to stay here," 6 Kirby answered. "Can you help him get a job in Hubberton? See, you're right; there's a slim chance people might cross realities. In any case, someone's got to keep an eye on your vault; come in a few times every day—"

"Everything was nice and quiet here until you came along," Janice answered, her eyes moving unsurely face to face.

"Those times are gone for good, but we'll be rich in a year or two," one of them answered. "We can keep someone here on salary. That's money coming into the community."

"You bet." "That's a promise." Four Kirbys nodded earnestly, trying their damndest to look like a litter of friendly puppies. Janice laughed explosively, leaning into the wall, her belly heaving with mirth. "What can I do?" she wheezed when she recovered her wind. "Get going, then. All except whoever it was wanted to marry me. Him I think I'll keep around."

“You hear about Janice?” asked the man in the feed cap. “They tell me the Money Lady finally roped herself a bull.”

“More like a gelding, some la-di-dah wimp from the city,” the other man answered.

Kirby pretended he was oblivious to their conversation, and hid his amusement at the sudden silence as he made his way deeper into the Cafe Commercial. “Coffee,” he told the waitress, and settled into a vacant rear booth to go through his trove of mail.

He and Janice were just back from a short honeymoon, and her postbox was overflowing. He stacked the envelopes: His, Hers, and Junk.

“His” consisted of one letter. Kirby opened it and waited until the coffee came. Only then did he begin to read.

Dear Kirby,

Well, things are coming along nicely. The identical twin business worked with the landlady, seeing as we’re careful never to travel three together. No trouble with Bob; in fact, Kirby Volsang’s productivity has risen quite a bit, and meanwhile we’ve just sent out our first manuscript—remember *Apotheosis*?

We sleep in shifts, wear the same clothes, and read books thrice over; proving the adage that three can live as cheaply as one-point-five. Moreover, we’re moonlighting: We’ve got a part-time job at Dreamwind Bookstore, a good way to do research and steer clear of lawsuits.

Did you do as we suggested, and stick the safety deposit boxes back in those bottom trays so no new Kirbys can come visiting?

Thanks for the second shipment, by the way. You can expect a large parcel from us in return, a few hundred of your old books to supply those other universes.

P.S. I know the enclosed check comes sooner than we agreed, but maybe you can get Janice a wedding present from us. If you ever get bored with Hubberton, remember I’ll gladly take your place. Think she’d notice?

“Yeah,” Kirby muttered, and stuck the letter in his pocket. Ten minutes later he gathered his mail and strolled off for his new home. Up on Janice’s sun porch, he opened the carton containing his flawed old story: the thuddingly unimaginative *Pirates of the Serenitan Sea*. He inserted blank paper into his typewriter, and tapped out the title.

He got up and left. He returned carrying a Coke and a cylinder of little blue pills. “Intelligence, huh?” He swallowed one, took a sip, and started into the long job of revision. ♦

Write Away!

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Looking Forward:

Fallen Angels

by Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle,
and Michael Flynn

Coming in July 1991 from Baen Books

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

Sometimes, a collaboration results in a book that is more than the sum of the individual talents who created it. *Fallen Angels* is definitely an example of this phenomenon. Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle have collaborated many times before, of course; here, for the first time, they join with Michael Flynn—and the three-way combination works to produce an exceptional story.

The world is the earth in a not too distant future. Some people began the move off planet, only to be trapped in near earth orbit habitats when humankind stopped supporting their efforts. On the planet, the greenhouse effect became the only important issue, and a world government was elected that did everything it could to end the heating. The effort succeeded all too well—causing a new Ice Age. As the glaciers grow and the climate becomes even more unstable, the nations begin to fight over the diminishing resources and remain united only in their dislike of those orbiting overhead. All of this activity leaves the orphaned orbital habitats lacking for everything, forcing their inhabitants to seek drastic solutions.

The following excerpt is taken from the first chapter of this outstanding novel.

High over the northern hemisphere the scoopship's hull began to sing. The cabin was a sounding box for vibrations far below the threshold of hearing. Alex MacLeod could feel his bones singing in sympathy.

Piranha was kissing high atmosphere.

Planet Earth was shrouded in pearl white. There was no break anywhere. There were mountain ranges of fluff, looming cliffs, vast plains that stretched to a far distant convex



Cover art by Stephen Hickman

horizon, a cloud cover that looked firm enough to walk on. An illusion; a geography of vapors as insubstantial as the dreams of youth. If he were to set foot upon them . . . The clouds did not float in free fall, as was proper, but in an acceleration frame that could hurl the scoopship headlong into an enormous ball of rock and iron and smash it like any dream.

Falling, they called it.

Alex felt the melancholy stealing over him again. Nostalgia? For that germ-infested ball of mud? Not possible. He could barely remember it. Snapshots from childhood; a chaotic montage of memories. He had fallen down the cellar steps once in a childhood home he scarcely recalled. Tumbling, arms flailing, head thumping hard against the concrete floor. He hadn't been hurt; not really. He'd been too small to mass up enough kinetic energy. But he recalled the terror vividly. Now he was a lot bigger, and he would fall a lot farther.

His parents had once taken him atop the Sears Tower and another time to the edge of the Mesa Verde cliffs; and each time he had thought what an awful long way down it was. Then, they had taken him so far up that down ceased to mean anything at all.

Alex stared out *Piranha's* windscreen at the cloud deck, trying to conjure that feeling of height; trying to feel that the clouds were *down* and he was *up*. But it had all been too many years ago, and another world. All he could see was distance. Living in the habitats did that to you. It stole height from your senses and left you only with distance.

He glanced covertly at Gordon Tanner in the copilot's seat. If you were born in the habbies, you never knew height at all. There were no memories to steal. Was Gordon luckier than he, or not?

The ship sang. He was beginning to hear it now.

And Alex MacLeod was back behind a stick, where God had meant him to be, flying a spaceship again. Melancholy was plain ingratitude! He had plotted and schemed his way into this assignment. He had pestered Mary and pestered Mary until she had relented and bumped his name to the top of the list, just to get rid of him. He had won.

Of course there was a cost. Victories are always bitter-sweet. Sweet because . . . He touched the stick and felt nothing. They were still in vacuum . . . thicker vacuum, that was heating up. If there wasn't enough air to give bite to the control surfaces, a pilot must call it vacuum.

How could you explain the sweetness to someone who had never conned a ship? You couldn't. He relaxed in the acceleration chair, feeling the tingling in his hands and feet. The itching anticipation. Oh, to be useful again; even if for a moment.

But bitter because . . . That part he did not want to think about. Just enjoy the moment; become one with it. If this was to be his last trip, he would enjoy it while he could. If everything went A-OK, he'd be back upstairs in a few hours, playing the hero for the minute or so that people would care. A real hero, not a retired hero. Then back in the day care center wiping snotty noses. It would be a long time before another dip trip came

along; by then the medics would know for sure, and that would be that. He'd never be on the list again.

Which meant that Alex MacLeod, pilot and engineer, wasn't needed any longer. So what do you do with a pilot when pilots aren't needed? What do the habbies do with a man who can't work outside, because one more episode of explosive decompression will bring on a fatal stroke?

Day care. Snotty noses. Work at learning to be a teacher, a job he didn't much like.

Look on the bright side, Alex my boy. Maybe you won't make it back at all.

Sure, he could always go out the way Mish Lykonov had in *Moon Rat*, auguring in to *Mare Tranquillitatis*. They'd have a ceremony—and they'd miss the ship more than him. Even Mary. Maybe especially Mary since she'd got him the mission.

He straightened in his seat and touched the controls again. Maybe just a touch of resistance . . .

"Chto delayet? Alex!"

Something had prodded Gordon awake. Alex glanced to the right. "What is it?"

"I'm getting a reading on the air temperature gauge!"

"Right. There's enough air outside now to *have* a temperature."

Gordon nodded, still unbelieving.

Gordon had read the book. Come to that, Gordon read a lot of books, but books don't mean much. No one ever learned anything out of a book, anyway. This was why they always teamed a newbie with an old pro. Hands-on learning. The problem with on-the-job training for *this* job was that there was not a hell of a lot of room for trial and error.

Alex moved the stick gently, and felt the ship respond. *Not vacuum any more!* He banked and brought them up level, feeling the air rushing past just outside the skin. His eyes danced across the gauges. Here. There. Not reading them. Just a glance to see if something was wrong, or if something had changed since the last glance. Dynamic air temperature. The Mach number needle sprang to life, leaped from zero to absurdity, then hunted across the dial. A grin stretched itself across his face. No blues now. He hadn't forgotten, at all; not a damned thing.

"What is funny?" Gordon demanded.

"Old war horse heard the trumpet again. Now it's your turn. Take the stick." Fun was fun, but it was time for the kid to wrap his hands around the real thing. There was only so much you could do in a simulator. "There. Feel it?"

"Uh . . ." Gordon pulled back slightly on the copilot's stick. He looked uncertain.

He hadn't felt anything. "Take over," Alex growled. "You're flying the ship now. Can't you tell?"

"Well . . ." Another tentative move at the controls.

Piranha wobbled. "Hey! Yeah!"

"Good. Look, it's hard to describe, but the ship will tell you how she's doing if you really listen. I don't mean you should forget the gauges. Keep scanning them; they're your eyes and ears. But you've got to lis-

ten with your hands and feet and ass, too. Make the ship an extension of your entire body. Do you feel it? That rush? That's air moving past us at five miles per second. Newton's not flying us any more. You are."

Gordon flashed a nervous grin, like he'd just discovered sex.

"What's our flight path?" Alex asked.

"Uh . . ." A quick glance at the map rollout. "Greenland upcoming."

"Good. Hate to be over Norway."

"Why?"

Why. Didn't the kid listen to the downside news broadcasts? *Gordon, this is your planet! Don't you care?* No, he probably didn't; because it *wasn't* his planet. It was his grandparents' planet.

"There's a war in Norway. If we flew over, somebody would cruise a missile at us sure as moonquakes; and we'd never even know which side did it."

The new tiles that formed the ship's skin were wonderful. In the old days, the skin would be glowing; but now . . . Four thousand degrees and no visible sign at all. Still, they'd be glowing like a madman's dream on an IR screen, new tiles or no; and that was all the downers would need to vector in on.

"Which side . . ." Gordon mused. "What are the sides?"

Alex laughed. "That's one of the reasons we can't be sure. When it started, it was what was left of NATO plus the Baltics versus what was left of the Warsaw Pact." Non-nuclear, but it just went on and on. Alex didn't really care who won any more than Gordon did. "After a while, the Scandinavians and the Russians took a nervous look over their shoulders at the glaciers, and East versus West became North versus South."

"Silly bastards. Nye kulturni."

"Da." It didn't surprise him any more. All the younger Floaters spoke Russian as automatically as English. Russian? Ever since *Peace* and *Freedom* had pooled their resources, everyone was supposed to learn each other's language; but Alex hadn't gotten past 'Ya tehye lyublyu.' Hello was 'zdravstvuyte.' Alex thought there was something masochistic about speaking a language that strung so many consonants together. "Be fair, Gordon. If you had ice growing a mile thick in your back yard, wouldn't you want to move south?"

Gordon mullied it. "Why south?"

He couldn't help the grin. "Never mind. Let me take her again. Hang on, while I kill some velocity. Watch what I do and follow me." He stroked the stick gently.

Here we go, baby. You'll love this. Drop the scoop face-on to the wind. Open wide. That's right. Spread your tail, just for a moment . . . Alex realized that his lips were moving and clamped them shut. The younger ones didn't understand when he talked to the ship. Gordon was having enough trouble *feeling* the ship. "Okay," he said finally, "that's done. Take over, again."

Gordon did, more smoothly than before. Alex watched him from the corner of his eye while pretending to study the instruments. *Piranha* was a sweet little ship. Alex had flown her once, years before, and considered her the best of the three remaining scoopers.

Maybe that was just Final Trip nostalgia. Maybe he would have felt the same about whichever ship he flew on his last dip; but he would shed a special tear for *Piranha* when they retired her. The scoopers were twenty-two years old already and, while there was not much wear and tear parked in a vacuum, screaming through the Earth's atmosphere like a white hot banshee did tend to age the gals a bit. *Jaws* was already retired. Here was Gordon at nineteen, just getting started; and the ships at twenty-two were ready to pack it in. Life was funny.

Alex ran a hand lightly across the instrument panel. Scoopships were pretty in an ugly sort of way: lifting bodies with gaping scoops that made them look like early jet airplanes. They could not land—no wings—but they didn't dip into the atmosphere deeply enough for that to matter. But they were the hottest ships around.

Piranha skimmed above the glare-white earth as hot as any meteor, but never too hot at any point. Humming, vibrating, functional.

Gordon was functional, too. Alert, but not tense; holding her nose just right while flame-hot air piled through the scoop and into the compressors and holding tanks. The velocity dropped below optimum on the dial and Gordon bled some of the air into the scramjet and added hydrogen until the velocity rose again. He did it casually, diffidently; as if he did this sort of thing every day. Alex nodded to himself. The kid had it. He just needed it coaxed out of him.

"Alex?" Gordon said suddenly. "Why not Greenland?"

"Hmm?"

"Why isn't anyone in Greenland shooting missiles?"

Alex grinned. That was good. Gordon was flying a scoopship on a dip trip, sucking air at five miles per, and trying to make casual conversation. *That's right, Gordo. You can't do this sort of thing all tensed up; you've got to be relaxed.* "Nobody there but Eskimos," he explained. "An Ice Age doesn't bother them any. Hell, they probably think they've all died and gone to Inuit Heaven."

"Eskimos I do not know. Gogol once wrote good story that speaks of Laplanders but I did not understand—" The sky had turned from black to navy blue. Wouldn't want to get any lower. Gordon glanced out the windscreen and said, "Shouldn't we be seeing land by now?"

Alex shook his head, realized Gordon wasn't looking at him, and answered. "No, the cloud-deck off the pole . . ." He stopped. The white below them wasn't the cloud-shroud any more. They must have gone past the southern edge or hit a hole in it. White on white. Cloud or ice. If you didn't actually *look* you might not notice. "Damn, damn. The ice is still growing."

Gordon didn't say anything. Alex watched him a moment longer then turned his attention to the gauges. Gordon was nineteen. There had *always* been an Ice Age, so it did not surprise him that the glaciers had crept farther south. Alex *thought* he remembered a different world—green, not white—before his parents brought him upstairs. He wasn't sure how much of it was genuine childhood memories and how much was movies or photographs in books. The habbies had a fair

number of books on tape, brought up when they still got along with the downers.

The Green Hills of Earth, he thought. Now the glaciers—not rivers of ice, but vast oceans of ice—were spreading south at tens of miles a year. Hundreds of miles in some places. In the dictionary, ‘glacial’ meant slow; but the experts had known as long ago as the sixties that Ice Ages came on fast. Ten thousand years ago the glaciers had covered England and most of Europe in less than a century, though no one had ever seen fit to revise his schoolbooks. But what did that matter? To a school kid a century was forever anyway.

As for Gordon . . . He glanced again at his co-pilot. Well, what the world is like in our lifetimes is what it should be like forever. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. It was funny to think of ground-side environmentalists desperately struggling against Nature, trying to preserve forever the temporary conditions and mayfly species of a brief interglacial. Alex looked again through the cockpit windscreen and sighed.

“It didn’t have to be,” he said abruptly.

“Eh?” Gordon gave him a puzzled glance.

“The Ice Age. We could have stopped it. Big orbiting solar mirrors. More microwave power stations. Sunlight is free. We could have beamed down enough power to stop the ice. Look what one little sunsat has done for Winnipeg.”

Gordon studied the frozen planet outside. He shook his head. “Ya nye ponimi,” he admitted. “I faked the examiners, but I never did get it. The what-did-they-call-it, polar ice cap? It stayed put for thousands of years. Then, all of a sudden—”

All of a sudden, Alex’s earphones warbled. He touched a hand to his car. “*Piranba* here.”

“Alex!” It was Mary Hopkins’ voice. She was sitting mission control for this dip. Alex wondered if he should be flattered. . . . And if Lonny was with her. “We’ve got a bogey rising,” said Mary. “Looks like he’s vectoring in on you.”

So, they don’t shoot missiles out of Greenland? Find another line of work, Alex-boy; you’ll never make it as a soothsayer. “Roger, Big Momma.” He spun to Gordon. “Taking over,” he barked. “Close the scoop. Seal her up. Countermeasures!”

“Da!” He said something else, too rapid to follow.

“English, damn your eyes!”

“Oh. Yeah. Roger. Scoops closed.”

Piranba felt better. Under control. “Close faceplates.” Alex pulled his shut and sealed it.

“Alex, I have something.” Gordon’s voice sounded tinny over the radio, or maybe a wee bit stressed. “Aft and to the left and below,” he said.

Seven o’clock low.

“Constant bearing and closing.”

“How are they seeing us?”

“K-band.”

“Jam it.”

“Am.”

He sure enough was. Alex grunted. At least Gordon had read *that* book. Alex squinted at his radar. There

was the bogey, sure enough. Small. Constant bearing and closing. “Hasing on.” He peeled off to starboard and watched the heat gauge rise. *Piranba* didn’t have the kind of wings a near miss would tear off. Just small fat fins and a big, broad, flat belly to be melted, evaporated or pierced. Alex bit his lip. Don’t think about that. Concentrate on what you can do.

The sharp turn pushed him against the corner of his seat. Alex relaxed to the extra weight and prayed that his Earth-born bones would remember how to take it. Decades of falling had turned him soft. The acceleration felt like a ton of sand covering him. He felt the blood start in his sinuses. But he could take it. He could take it because he had to.

Gordon sat gripping the arms of the co-pilot’s seat. His cheeks sagged. His head bowed. Gordon had been born in free fall and thrust was new to him. He looked frightened. It must feel like he’d taken sick.

The turn seemed to go on forever. Something airt felt to the deck with a crash. Alex watched the bogey on the scope. Each sweep of the arm brought the blip closer to the center. Closer. He pulled harder against the stick. The next blip was left of center. Then it arced away. Alex knew that was an illusion. The missile had gone straight; *Piranba* had banked.

“You lost it!” Gordon shouted. He turned and looked at Alex with a grin that nearly split his face in two.

Alex smiled back. “Scared?”

“Hell, no.”

“Yeah. Me, too. Anyone flying at Mach 26 while a heat seeking cruise missile tries to fly up his ass is entitled to be scared.” He toggled the radio. It was Management Decision time. “Big Momma, we have lost the bogey. Do you have instructions?”

There was a pause; short, but significant. “We need that nitrogen,” said Mary’s voice.

Alex waited for her to finish, then realized that she had. *We need that nitrogen.* That was all she was going to say, leaving the ball in his octant.

Of course we need the nitrogen, he thought. Recycling wasn’t perfect; and some of the molecules out-gassed right through the walls of the stations. Every now and then someone had to take the bucket to the well and get some more. The question was when. When someone with an itchy trigger finger was sitting in a missile farm somewhere below?

“I see,” he said slowly. He could pack it home and be the goat; his last trip a failure. Delta vee thrown away for no gain. Or he could fly heroically into the jaws of death and suck air. Either way, it was his decision.

He sensed Lonny Hopkins’ spidery hand behind things. If Mary was performing plausible deniability on his bones, it must be because her husband was floating right behind her at the console, one hand gentle on her shoulder, while she downlinked to the stud who had . . .

Jesus, but some people had long memories.

Well, Mary was a free citizen, wasn’t she? If the wife of the station commander wants a little extracurricular, it’s her choice. She had never pushed him away; not until that last night together. We’re hanging on up here by

our fingernails, she had said then. We've all got to pull together, stand behind the station commander.

Right.

Nobody could stand behind Lonny Hopkins because he never turned his back on anyone. With good reason. *Maybe he's right. He is good at the goddam job, and maybe his position is so precarious that there's no room for democratic debate. That doesn't mean I have to like it.*

And it's decision time.

"Understood, Big Momma. We'll get your air." *Take that, Commander Lonny Hopkins.* He clicked off and turned to Gordon. "Open the scoops, but bleed half of it to the scramjets."

"Alex . . ." Gordon frowned and bit his lip.

"They say they need the air."

"Yeah—da." Gordon flipped toggled switches back up. Alex felt the drag as the big scoop doors opened again. The doors had just completed their cycle when Gordon began shouting. "Ekho! Ekho priblizh Gyetsya!" "English!"

Something exploded aft of the cabin and Alex felt his suit pop out. His ears tried to pop, and Alex MacLeod whined deeply in his throat.

He'd forgotten, but his nerves remembered. It wasn't falling he feared, it was air tearing through his throat, daggers in his ears, pressure trying to rip his chest apart. Five times his suit had leaked air while they worked to save Freedom Station. He wore the scars in ruptured veins and arteries, everywhere on his body. There were more scars in his lungs and in his sinus cavities. A sixth exposure to vacuum would have his brains spewing through his nose. Alex couldn't come out to play; they had to keep him in the day care center.

His fists clenched on the controls in a rigor mortis grip. He heard his own whine of terror, and Gordon's shout, and felt *Piranha* falling off hard to port. And his suit was holding, holding.

He fought the stick hard when he tried to steady her. Had he recovered too late? "Hold fast, baby," he said through clenched teeth. "Hold fast." *Piranha* vibrated and shuddered. Something snapped with the sound of piano wire. "Come on, baby. Steady down."

Incredibly, she did. "Good girl," he muttered, then tongued the uplink on his suit radio. "Big Momma, Big Momma. We've been hit." There was nothing for it now but use up all the air they'd scooped, and anything else, to light off the jets. Get back in orbit; out of the Well. When you're in orbit, you're halfway to anywhere! Get in orbit and pickup would be easy. He toggled the switches.

The rocket wouldn't light. The rocket wouldn't light. Air speed was dropping steadily. The rocket wouldn't light. He suppressed the knot of panic that twisted itself in his gut. Time enough afterward, if there was an afterward. The scramjet alone was not enough to reach orbit again. It wouldn't be long before *Piranha* would be moving too slow to keep the jet lit. She would become a glider.

And not a terribly good glider.

Alex swallowed. It looked awfully cold down below. And the rocket wouldn't light.

"Mayday," he said. "Mayday. *Piranha* has a problem." A part of his mind was detached, admiring the cool way he reacted after that one moment of terror.

"This is Big Momma. What is your status?"

Well, I'm just fine, Mary; and how are you? "We're going in, Mary. Tell my family. It's all in my file directory. Access code word is *dunegan*." He glanced over at Gordon, but the teenager just shook his head. His face was white through the plexiglas face shield. "And the Tanner family, too." Gordon didn't have any children yet. He was the child. Damned never unwanted child at that. JayDee on parole. *Some parole!* "Watch where we land and get the message out. Tighthead."

The phones hissed for long seconds. "Sure, Alex. We have friends on Earth. Maybe not many, but . . . We'll tell them. They'll take care of you. Can you get her down?"

"I may not be good for anything else, but, by God, you paint stripes on a brick and I can fly her."

"Then that's two things you do well."

He felt warmth spreading outward from his belly. Was Lonny still there? Would he understand that message? Alex almost hoped he could. Mary said something else, but he was too busy with the ship to hear her. Airspeed had dropped to near Mach 2, and he tilted her nose down to keep the scramjet lit and tried to turn south. Ice. Ice all around and the cloud deck closing in again. *Piranha* was shaped like the bastard daughter of an airplane and a cement mixer. The slower she flew, the more she acted like a cement mixer.

Not on the ice, baby. Not on the ice. Hang in there . . .

"Do you really fly that well?" Gordon asked tightly.

"I landed on Earth once before, Gordon. You also do you know who can say that?" *Tom Corbett, Space Cadet. That's me. Disguised as a washed-up day care gopher, he is in reality Alex MacLeod, Hot Pilot. Lord, just let me get us down in one piece.*

Fifteen miles up and the air was thick. Mach 1.5. The clouds below were puffy with turbulence. *Piranha* was diving into a storm. He wondered whether North Dakota was flat or mountainous.

Maybe an ice landing would be all right. Ice was smooth, wasn't it? Or was that only true in free fall? *Piranha* was hot from friction. She'd melt her own runway across the glacier.

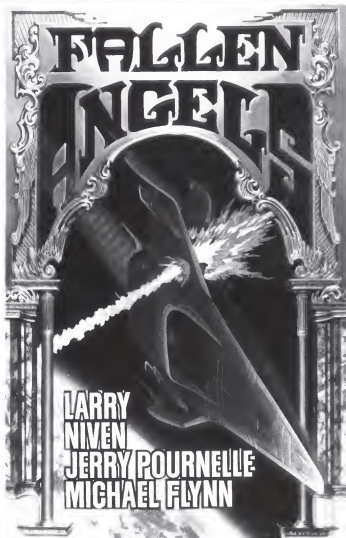
Sure, but step outside afterward. Your eyeballs will freeze so cold they'll shatter when you blink. . . .

The clouds closed in and he was flying by radar. Dropping. Dropping.

Gordon couldn't lift his head against the acceleration. "At least we'll have life support," he said suddenly. "Life support for four billion people, my teacher told me. And it doesn't get really cold, right? Cold enough to freeze water, but not carbon dioxide."

Alex grunted. Cold enough to freeze water. *Gordo, what is the human body made of?* "Right," he said. Gordon wasn't a distraction. He was just a voice. The last thing Alex wanted during his last moments was dead silence. There would be enough of that afterward.

Think positive, Alex-boy. You'll live through the landing, so you can freeze to death on the ice. ♦



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IT ALL HAPPENED SO FAST...

One minute the two Space Hab astronauts were scoop-diving the atmosphere, the next day they'd been shot down over the North Dakota glacier and were the object of a massive manhunt by the United States government.

That government, dedicated to saving the environment from the evils of technology, had been voted into power because everybody knew the Green House

Effect had to be controlled, whatever the cost. But who would have thought that the cost of ending pollution would include not only total government control of day-to-day life, but the onset of a new ice age?

Stranded in the anti-technological heartland of America, paralyzed by Earth's gravity, the "Angels" had no way back to the Space Habs, the last bastions of

high technology and intellectual freedom on, or over, the Earth. But help was on its way, help from the most unlikely sources....

Join #1 national bestsellers Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, and Michael Flynn in a world where civilization is on the ropes, and the environmentalists have created their own worst nightmare. A world of *Fallen Angels*.

Looking Forward:

Guards! Guards!

by Terry Pratchett

Coming in July 1991 from Roc Books

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

Anyone who hasn't already visited Discworld or its greatest city, Ankh-Morpork, is in for a real treat with *Guards! Guards!* This book from Terry Pratchett is the latest in a series of humorous novels that compare in tone with Bob Asprin's Myth books and Piers Anthony's Xanth series, though Terry's work has a strong British flavor.

As you might guess, Discworld is a flat body. As you might not guess, it travels through space on the backs of four elephants who themselves are standing on the back of a great turtle. In a nearly infinite universe, almost anything is possible—and Discworld just happens to be one of the least probable of those possibilities.

The story in *Guards! Guards!* follows the efforts of Ankh-Morpork's police force as the lawmen deal with a number of problems. The leader, Captain Vimes, is looking for the facts—just the facts, ma'am—concerning secret societies, angry wizards, runaway magic, and a mad lady dragon tamer.

Following are three excerpts that hint at the fun contained within this book.

—

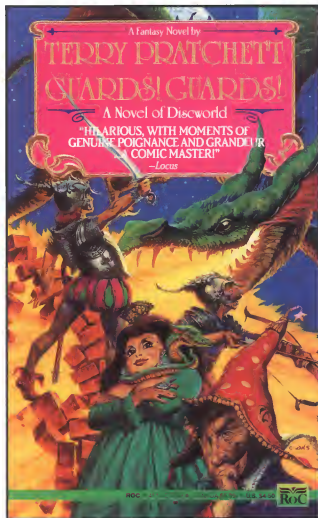
This is where the dragons went.

They lie . . .

Not dead, not asleep. Not waiting, because waiting implies expectation. Possibly the word we're looking for here is . . .

. . . dormant.

And although the space they occupy isn't like normal space, nevertheless they are packed in tightly. Not a cubic inch there but is filled by a claw, a talon, a scale, the tip of a tail, so the effect is like one of those trick drawings and your eyeballs eventually realize



Cover art by Darrell K. Sweet

that the space between each dragon is, in fact, another dragon.

They could put you in a mind of a can of sardines, if you thought sardines were huge and scaly and proud and arrogant.

And presumably, somewhere, there's the key.

In another space entirely, it was early morning in Ankh-Morpork, oldest and greatest and grubbier of cities. A thin drizzle dripped from the grey sky and punctuated the river mist that coiled among the streets. Rats of various species went about their nocturnal occasions. Under night's damp cloak assassins assassinated, thieves thieved, hussies hustled. And so on.

And drunken Captain Vimes of the Night Watch staggered slowly down the street, folded gently into the gutter outside the Watch house and lay there while, above him, strange letters made of light sizzled in the damp and changed colour . . .

The city wasa, wasa, wasa wossname. Thing. *Woman*. Thass what it was. *Woman*. Roaring, ancient, centuries old. Strung you along, let you fall in thingy, love, with her, then kicked you inna, inna, thingy. Thingy, in your mouth. Tonsils. *Teeth*. That's what it, she, did. She wasa . . . thing, you know, lady dog. Puppy. Hen. *Bitch*. And then you hated her and, and just when you thought you'd got her, it, out of your, your, whatever, then she opened her great booming rotten heart to you, caught you off bal, bal, bal, thing. *Ance*. Yeah. Thassit. Never knew where where you stood. Lay. Only thing you were sure of, you couldn't let her go. Because, because she was yours, all you had, even in her gutters . . .

Damp darkness shrouded the venerable buildings of Unseen University, premier college of wizardry. The only light was a faint octarine flicker from the tiny windows of the new High Energy Magic building, where keen-edged minds were probing the very fabric of the universe, whether it liked it or not.

And there was light, of course, in the Library.

The Library was the greatest assemblage of magical texts anywhere in the multiverse. Thousands of volumes of occult lore weighted its shelves.

It was said that, since vast amounts of magic can seriously distort the mundane world, the Library did not obey the normal rules of space and time. It was said that it went on *forever*. It was said that you could wander for days among the distant shelves, that there were lost tribes of research students somewhere in there, that strange things lurked in forgotten alcoves and there, they were by other things that were even stranger.*

Wise students in search of more distant volumes took care to leave chalk marks on the shelves as they roamed

deeper into the fusty darkness, and told friends to come looking for them if they weren't back by supper.

And, because magic can only loosely be cowed, the Library books themselves were more than mere pulped wood and paper.

Raw magic crackled from their spines, earthing itself harmlessly in the copper rails nailed to every shelf for that very purpose. Faint traceries of blue fire crawled across the bookcases and there was a sound, a papery whispering, such as might come from a colony of roosting starlings. In the silence of the night the books talked to one another.

There was also the sound of someone snoring.

The light from the shelves didn't so much illuminate as highlight the darkness, but by its violet flicker a watcher might just have identified an ancient and battered desk right under the central dome.

The snoring was coming from underneath it, where a piece of tattered blanket barely covered what looked like a heap of sandbags but was in fact an adult male orangutan.

It was the Librarian.

Not many people these days remarked upon the fact that he was an ape. The change had been brought about by a magical accident, always a possibility where so many powerful books are kept together, and he was considered to have got off lightly. After all, he was still basically the same shape. And he had been allowed to keep his job, which he was rather good at, although 'allowed' is not really the right word. It was the way he could roll his upper lip back to reveal more incredibly yellow teeth than any other mouth the University Council had ever seen before that somehow made sure the matter was never really raised.

But now there was another sound, the alien sound of a door creaking open. Footsteps padded across the floor and disappeared amongst the clustering shelves. The books rustled indignantly, and some of the larger grimoires rattled their chains.

The Librarian slept on, lulled by the whispering of the rain.

In the embrace of his gutter, half a mile away, Captain Vimes of the Night Watch opened his mouth and started to sing.

* * *

And now it was two of the clock the following morning. And all was well, apart from the rain. It was drizzling again.

There are some towns in the multiverse which think they know how to have a good time. Places like New Orleans and Rio reckon they not only know how to push the boat out but set fire to the harbour as well; but compared to Ankh-Morpork with its hair down they're a Welsh village at 2pm on a wet Sunday afternoon.

Fireworks banged and sparkled in the damp air over the turbid mud of the river Ankh. Various domesticated animals were being roasted in the streets. Dancers conga'd from house to house, often managing to pick up

*All this was untrue. The truth is that even big collections of ordinary books distort space, as can readily be proved by anyone who has been around a really old-fashioned second-hand bookshop, one of those that look as though they were designed by M. Escher on a bad day and has more staircases than storeys and those rows of shelves which end in little docks that are surely too small for a full-sized human to enter. The relevant equation is Knowledge = power + energy = matter = mass, a good bookshop is just a gentle Black Hole that knows how to read.

any loose ornaments while doing so. There was a lot of quaffing going on. People who in normal circumstances would never think of doing it were shouting "Hurrah."

Vimes stalked gloomily through the crowded streets, feeling like the only pickled onion in a fruit salad. He'd feeling the rank the evening off.

He wasn't feeling at all royalist. He didn't think he had anything against kings and such, but the sight of *Ankh-Morporkians* waving flags was mysteriously upsetting. That was something only silly subject people did, in other countries. Besides, the idea of royal plumes in his hat revolted him. He'd always had a thing about plumes. Plumes sort of, well, bought you off, told everyone that you didn't belong to yourself. And he'd feel like a bird. It'd be the last straw.

His errant feet led him back to the Yard. After all, where else was there? His lodgings were depressing and his landlady had complained about the holes which, despite much shouting, Errol kept making in the carpet. And the smell Errol made. And Vimes couldn't drink in a tavern tonight without seeing things that would upset him even more than the things he normally saw when he was drunk.

It was nice and quiet, although the distant sounds of revelry could be heard through the window.

Errol scrambled down from his shoulder and started to eat the coke in the fireplace.

Vimes sat back and put his feet up.

What a day! And what a fight! The dodging, the weaving, the shouts of the crowd, the young man standing there looking tiny and unprotected, the dragon taking a deep breath in a way now very familiar to Vimes . . .

And not flaming. That had surprised Vimes. It had surprised the crowd. It had certainly surprised the dragon, which had tried to squirt at its own nose and clawed desperately at its flame ducts. It had remained surprised right up to the moment when the lad ducked in under one claw and thrust the sword home.

And then a thunderclap.

You'd have thought there'd have been some bits of dragon left, really.

Vimes pulled a scrap of paper towards him. He looked at the notes he'd made yesterday:

Itym: Heavy draggon, but yet it can flye right welke;

Itym: The fyre be main boi, yett issueth from ane living Thing;

Itym: The Swamp dragons be right Poor Things, yet this monstrous Form waxeth full mightily;

Itym: From whence it cometh none knowe, nor whitther it goeth, nor where it bideth beetween-times;

Itym: Whyfore did it burneth so neattle?

He pulled the pen and ink towards him and, in a slow round hand, added:

Itym: Can a draggon be destroyed into utterlye noethinge?

He thought for a while, and continued:

Itym: Whyfore did it Explode that noone may find It, search they greatly?

A puzzler, that. Lady Ramkin said that when a swamp dragon exploded there was dragon everywhere. And this one had been a damn great thing. Admittedly its insides must have been an alchemical nightmare, but the citizens of Ankh-Morpork should still have been spending the night shovelling dragon off the streets. No-one seemed to have bothered about this. The purple smoke was quite impressive, though.

Errol finished off the coke and started on the fire irons. So far this evening he had eaten three cobblestones, a doorknob, something unidentifiable he'd found in the gutter and, to general astonishment, three of Cut-me-own-Throat's sausages made of genuine pork organs. The crunching of the poker going down mingled with the patter of rain on the windows.

Vimes stared at the paper again and then wrote:

Itym: How can Kinges come of noethinge?

He hadn't even seen the lad close to. He looked personable enough, not exactly a great thinker, but definitely the kind of profile you wouldn't mind seeing on your small change. Mind you, after killing the dragon he could have been a cross-eyed goblin for all that it mattered. The mob had borne him in triumph to the Patrician's palace.

Lord Vetinari had been locked up in his own dungeons. He hadn't put up much fight, apparently. Just smiled at everyone and went quietly.

What a happy coincidence for the city that, just when it needed a champion to kill the dragon, a king came forth.

Vimes turned this thought over for a while. Then he turned it back to front. He picked up the quill and wrote:

Itym: What a bappy chance it be, for a lad that would be Kinge, that there be a Draggon to slae to prove beyond doubt his honey fiddes.

It was a lot better than birthmarks and swords, that was for sure.

He twiddled the quill for a while, and then doxxled:

Itym: The draggon was not a Mechanical devise, yette surely no wizzard has the power to create a beaste of that mag, magg, maggnynt. Size.

Itym: Whye, in the Pinche, could it not Flame?

Itym: Where did it come from?

Itym: Where did it goe?

The rain pounded harder on the window. The sounds of celebration became distinctly damp, and then faded completely. There was a murmur of thunder.

Vimes underlined *goe* several times. After further consideration he added two more question marks: ??

After staring at the effect for some time he rolled the paper into a ball and threw it into the fireplace, where it was fielded and swallowed by Errol.

There had been a crime. Senses Vimes didn't know he possessed, ancient policeman's senses, prickled the hairs on his neck and told him there had been a crime. It was probably such an odd crime that it didn't figure anywhere in Carrot's book, but it had been committed all right. A handful of high-temperature murders was only the start of it. He'd find it, and give it a name.

Then he stood up, took his leather rain cape from its hook behind the door, and stepped out into the naked city.

* * *

The Librarian swung on. It was slow progress, because there were things he wasn't keen on meeting. Creatures evolve to fill every niche in the environment, and some of those in the dusty immensity of L-space were best avoided. They were much more unusual than ordinary unusual creatures.

Usually he could forewarn himself by keeping a careful eye on the kickstool crabs that grazed harmlessly on the dust. When they were spooked, it was time to hide. Several times he had to flatten himself against the shelves as a thesaurus thundered by. He waited patiently as a herd of Critters crawled past, grazing on the contents of the choicer books and leaving behind them piles of small slim volumes of literary criticism. And there were other things, things which he hurried away from and tried not to look hard at . . .

And you had to avoid clichés at all costs.

He finished the last of his peanuts atop a stepladder, which was browsing mindlessly off the high shelves.

The territory definitely had a familiar feel, or at least he got the feeling that it would eventually be familiar. Time had a different meaning in L-space.

There were shelves whose outline he felt he knew. The book titles, while still unreadable, held a tantalising hint of legibility. Even the musty air had a smell he thought he recognised.

He stumbled quickly along a side passage, turned the corner and, with only the slightest twinge of disorientation, shuffled into that set of dimensions that people, because they don't know any better, think of as normal.

He just felt extremely hot and his fur stood straight out from his body as the temporal energy gradually discharged.

He was in the dark.

He extended one arm and explored the spines of the books by his side. Ah. *Now* he knew where he was.

He was home.

He was home a week ago.

It was essential that he didn't leave footprints. But that wasn't a problem. He shinned up the side of the nearest bookcase and, under the starlight of the dome, hurried onwards.

Lupine Wonse glared up, red-eyed, from the heap of paperwork on his desk. No-one in the city knew anything about coronations. He'd had to make it up as he went

along. There should be plenty of things to wave, he knew that.

"Yes?" he said, abruptly.

"Er, there's a Captain Vimes to see you," said the flunkie.

"Vimes of the Watch?"

"Yes, sir. Says it's of the utmost importance."

Wonse looked down his list of other things that were also of the utmost importance. Crowning the king, for one thing. The high priests of fifty-three religions were all claiming the honour. It was going to be a scrum. And then there were the crown jewels.

Or rather, there *weren't* the crown jewels. Somewhere in the preceding generations the crown jewels had disappeared. A jeweller in the Street of Cunning Artificers was doing the best he could in the time with gilt and glass.

Vimes could wait.

"Tell him to come back another day," said Wonse.

"Good of you to see us," said Vimes, appearing in the doorway.

Wonse glared at him.

"Since you're here . . ." he said. Vimes dropped his helmet on Wonse's desk in what the secretary thought was an offensive manner, and sat down.

"Take a seat," said Wonse.

"Have you eaten breakfast yet?" said Vimes.

"Now really—" Wonse began.

"Don't worry," said Vimes cheerfully. "Constable Carrot will go and see what's in the kitchens. This chap will show him the way."

When they had gone Wonse leaned across the drifts of paperwork.

"There had better," he said, "be a very good reason for—"

"The dragon is back," said Vimes.

Wonse stared at him for a while.

Vimes stared back.

"And you've had a busy few days," said Wonse soothingly. "If I'd been knocked down and almost burned alive by a dragon I expect I'd be seeing them all the time."

Vimes stared at him with his mouth open. He couldn't think of anything to say. Whatever stretched and knotted elastic had been driving him along these last few days had gone entirely limp.

"You don't think you've been overdoing it, do you?" said Wonse.

Ah, thought Vimes. Jolly good.

He slumped forward.

The Librarian leaned cautiously over the top of the bookcase and unfolded an arm into the darkness.

There it was.

His thick fingernails grasped the spine of the book, pulled it gently from its shelf and hoisted it up. He raised the lantern carefully.

No doubt about it. *The Summoning of Dragons*. Single copy, first edition, slightly foxed and extremely dragoned.

He set the lamp down beside him, and began to read the first page. ♦

Looking Forward:

Space Cops: Mindblast

by Diane Duane and Peter Morwood

Coming in July 1991 from Avon Books

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

Mindblast, the latest collaboration from Diane Duane and Peter Morwood, is the first book in a trilogy featuring two experienced police officers. The time is a hundred years in the future, and police are spread thinly across the settled solar system. Their job resembles that of the Texas Rangers on another frontier ages ago . . . except that now the weapons are much more deadly and the deserts a whole lot emptier.

Two agents, Joss and Evan, have been assigned to investigate the death of another Space Cop on one of the first, and now almost obsolete, L5 satellites. To solve the mystery of the murder, they also have to break up a ring of criminals who are manufacturing a drug called mindblast. This new drug, though ultimately fatal, gives its users both an increased intelligence and sharper awareness. For the few days before the drug kills him or her, every mindblast junkie is an absolute genius—an effect that makes catching any of the users nearly impossible.

In the following excerpt from *Mindblast*, the two Space Cops have decided to visit the spot where the other ranger was killed.

Joss had somewhat gotten over his disturbance at what he had seen in the upper levels, he thought; or perhaps it was just that he didn't expect this part of the fiver to look any different from the way they found it. But there was no question that it was terrible.

The change didn't happen instantly, of course. For seven or eight levels down they passed through residential areas that seemed pleasant enough. But about the fifteenth level down, even the occasional staggering of accommodation that let a sight of the skyroof through suddenly ended. And for several



Cover art by Duran Vallejo

more levels things were still all right, but at the same time there was a sense of uneasiness, a nervous feeling. There were no longer buildings with walled enclosures outside them, but plain walls that ran up to ceilings that grew increasingly lower. And the doors grew closer and closer together, implying that the flats behind them were much smaller than those further up in the fiver's structure. The walls began more and more to be marked with the various sigils of downrunner groups; daubed on in various paints, scratched into the walls, cut into the floors or sometimes the ceilings.

There were fewer and fewer public escalators or slidewalks as they descended, and fewer of them were in any condition to run. The further down Evan and Joss headed, the more of the escalators and slides turned out to have been vandalized, either by having their controls wrecked, or pieces of meal jammed into the works, or (in one case) apparently by explosives. Evan looked at this last example with a sort of crooked admiration. "A talented amateur," he said. "They could have made use of that kind of talent in the Forces."

"I suppose," Joss said, "that if you had to blow things up, it would be better to do it as a job, and get paid for it, and be appreciated—as in the Forces. But on the other hand, this is exactly what some of the kids in the gangs are doing, I suspect. Someone's paying them well and appreciating what they do. Not the right someone, though."

"By our standards," Evan said. "But I doubt they care much about ours."

They kept walking down, down, always down, on staircases, on more shattered escalators that were little better than staircases now; in a couple of places down ladders through service ports, where the stairs were blocked from floor to ceiling with garbage and burnt furniture, all jammed together into impromptu, but effective, barricades. Some stairways had steel rods clumsily welded across them, so that Evan and Joss had to backtrack and find other ways. But all the ways were always down.

"*Facilis descensus Averno*," Evan said, "*sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras. Hoc opus, bic labor est*—"

"What?"

Evan looked at him in mild surprise. "Have you no education, man?" he said. And then grinned. "Or might it be that I can be as obscure as you when I set my mind to it?"

"Wouldn't surprise me. What does it mean?"

"Down is easy," Evan said. "Up is hard."

"I'm so glad I have you to tell me these things," Joss said.

They kept descending. There were no more residences down here—or at least, no cubic that had been built as residences. It was all industrial, some few factories hanging grimly on, all fronted with reinforced panelling and bristling with vandalized security systems, the panelling paint-daubed, gouged, ray-burnt, ripped half off in places. Other factories were long since closed, broken open and reformed by squatters, their outside panelling broken up with odd excrescences like sharp-

ened spikes and homemade (or stolen and cannibalized) razor wire. Some doors had tripwires or hidden triggers in or near them that reminded Joss of crude terrorist traps invented during the old bush wars on Earth. The lighting was poor everywhere, and grew poorer. Light elements and plates had been stolen; those that couldn't be stolen had been vandalized, apparently out of spite.

"This is a war zone," Joss said, almost awestruck by the sheer wretchedness of it all.

"It is that," Evan said. "Think how many people we've seen in the last twenty minutes."

None, Joss thought. "But we've heard them. . . ." For there had been shufflings, whispers, the occasional sound of something being dropped when there seemed to be no one there to drop it.

"Any minute now," Evan said calmly, gazing around them as they walked. "Something a bit more definite should happen."

Wonderful, Joss thought, resisting the urge to scratch the itch between his shoulder blades, the itch that he always got from being watched when he couldn't see who was doing the watching. His hand brushed his Remington as he walked, never doing more than brushing it, however. *No point in precipitating anything. But I'd be bappier with bead armor at least—*

The bolt went right past his ear and impacted the nearby wall, none too hard, but too hard for Joss's liking. It was a low-charge weapon from the sound of it, which meant the fire was moderately close. *Head armor would have been nice*, Joss thought, then looked around for the source. Whoever was shooting was well hidden—not too hard, in this dingy place. He dropped into a crouch, which Evan had already done beside him.

"What do you—" he started to whisper to Evan, but found himself looking at a blank, shining grey mask, which had swiveled away from him. "About three point four meters," Evan said, "and around the corner. I can see his heat signature."

"Aha," Joss said. Evan lifted one arm, as if pointing—and there was a sudden terrific outburst of fire from the fairing under the arm. The slugs stitched a neat circle of smoking holes in the wall three meters away. *Point four*, Joss said to himself, as silence fell. There was no sound except what might have been a soft thump. Someone falling over?

Joss looked around in the dimness and listened hard. There was a soft scuffling sound. "Not leaving. I take it," he whispered.

"Oh, indeed not," said Evan, shifting a little in his crouch. "They're going to want to make sure that wasn't an accident. I daresay we'll have to do a couple more of them. You want the next one?"

"Not particularly," Joss said, "but I'll take him if I can see him."

"You needn't. About four o'clock low, on your left." Joss brought his Remington up, sighted along it. It too had a heat-sensitive sight, but in conditions like this it worked none too well. "No," Evan said, "a little more to the left. Right, that's it. Up a touch. Hard burn now, that panel has been reinforced."

Joss fired. After about a second's burn there was a scream, another thump. "Good enough," Evan said. "That's two out of four. One of those two at least will survive to upset their friends. One more should do it."

"And they won't know how that last one was hit, seeing that I'm not wearing armor—"

When Evan answered, Joss was sure he could hear a grin in his voice. "No harm in you having a little protection, eh? Now, then. Here's my chance."

Joss watched Evan come up from the crouch, very slowly, the sound of the armor's assistance servos loud in the smoking silence. It was astounding how tall he suddenly looked in the dimness. Evan took several stalking steps forward, paused—for effect? Joss wondered—then reached out and simply put one arm through the wall, up to the armpit. There he stood, for a moment, unmoving; then pulled, and the panelling groaned and cracked and bowed and broke outward, and a human body fell out, pulled out by its shoulder.

It was a young woman, dressed in torn skintights with various bright rags tied about the arms and legs. She was dirty, and she stank, and her greasy blond hair was twisted into a plait and tied to the back of her head with a leather braid. Her sharp-featured young face was contorted into one snarl of fear, pain and defiance, but it turned mostly to fear as she looked up at Evan standing over her—the hard grey armor, the faceless helm, the still-smoking gunport on one arm.

"One of them is dead," Evan said conversationally; "the one with the Heckler and Koch. Don't bother going back for it—my partner blew it up in your fat boyfriend's face. The other one should live, but his firing hand isn't going to be good for anything much any more. And what shall I do with you, now?"

He shook her a little in a godnattered way, the way a terrier might shake a rat that was in no condition to get away. The girl's face went as far into fear as Joss thought it could go, then into rage. "I bite your little thing off, if y've got one inside there," she screamed, flailing her arms and trying to find something about Evan that she could punch without hurting herself.

This was a futile attempt, though Evan let her wear herself out a bit. "Don't flatter yourself, then," he said finally. "I wouldn't care to bother with you even if you were ten years older and had the twelve baths you need, and bought yourself a brain. Get your ugly snotty little self out of here and tell your masters that my partner and I have business in these parts. Anyone messes with us, they're dead, that's all: no parleys in the act, no quarter given. Just dead and smoking, and if anyone wants their bacon after we're done with it, they're welcome." And with a casual gesture he flung her a third of the way down the corridor, so that she landed skidding and slid five or ten meters further still.

She scrambled around to her feet, facing them, and backed several steps down the corridor. Evan stood there silently, his arms folded, watching her. Joss hefted his Remington in a thoughtful sort of way. The girl dove around the corner and was gone.

Letting the Remington fall, Joss glanced at Evan. "You

have quite a way with women," he said in admiration.

"Ah, well," Evan said, "put it down to my misspent youth. But that should make things more interesting for the time being. Where are we headed?"

"Two more corridors down," Joss said, "and one over." They started on their way again. "The dead one," Joss said after a moment, "that was mine?"

"It seemed wise," Evan said, speaking a bit more softly. "You don't have a suit, after all . . . but it seems wise to let them think that you're the meaner of the two of us."

Joss laughed. "And we're going to play Good Cop/Bad Cop with them?"

"Well, good sop, bad sop, anyway. No harm in that, considering that they have us a bit outnumbered. We must make the most of our advantages. . . ."

They turned the corner, looked down the corridor that led from it. There was a scuffle of movement down at the end—people getting hurriedly and belatedly out of sight.

"News travels fast," Joss said. "The next group should just watch to see what we do."

Evan was still for a moment, then said, "About five of them, I think. I can see where they've been. The heat trace is a little muddled together, but I don't think more than five people could have made what I'm seeing. They're not carrying anything too hot for us to handle, at least nothing I can read. How close are we?"

"Down to the end, forty meters, then around the corner again."

"Right."

They went softly down the corridor, looking from one side to another at the gang sigils scrawled there. The same one repeated again and again, a sort of spiral with a crooked line drawn through it. Then, about a hundred meters down, came the final corner. Around it was a little dead-end corridor, and to one side of it the panels were burned and scarred. On one panel was daubed the words: COPS DIE HEERE, and the spiral-and-zigzag sigil again.

Joss stood there for a moment. "Shall we?" he said.

"One must speak to people in their own language," Evan said mildly, reached out, and pulled the panel down off the wall—then broke it in two over his knee, doubled it and broke it again, and then crumbled up the pieces in his hands, like crackers, and let them fall.

Joss nodded, pulled out his Remington, flicked it up to high, and flamed the pieces of panel. It took only a moment to catch: a Remington's high setting can melt steel without too much trouble. They stood there and watched the panelling burn, despite the fumes, which were bothering Joss fiercely—but he would rather have died than show it.

"That should make our initial position plain," Evan said. "Let's be out of here." And he glanced over at another of the spiral-and-zigzag glyphs, lifted his arm, and casually drew two lines of laser fire over it, so that a burning black X obliterated it in seconds. "Not that we won't be back," he said.

They turned their backs on the fire and began the long climb back. ♦

About the Authors

When **Paul Di Filippo** found out we wanted to publish "Victoria," he shared a couple of interesting bits of information with us:

"Not to make you doubt yourself," he said (nice time to bring up *that* subject, Paul), "but [the story] has met with absolute bewilderment from everyone, with one exception. They [other editors] all found it too weird. Odd, I thought that was part of what SF was about!"

The exception, he went on to explain, was Robert Silverberg, who had a chance to use it in the first volume of the new *Universe* anthology series and thought it was "brilliant" but was forced to turn it down because of its length.

For the record, Paul did get a different story into *Universe 1*—a piece entitled "One Night in Television City." He has produced more than three dozen published short stories in the last six years, including four others in *AMAZING*® Stories—beginning with "Kid Charlemagne" (September 1987), which was a Nebula Award finalist, and ending with "Harlem Nova," the cover story of the September 1990 issue.

Adrian Nikolas Phoenix is one of the dozens of writers who have been introduced to SF readers through the pages of *AMAZING* Stories. "Sacrament," in the January 1990 issue, was her professional debut. "The Hand That Snaps the Lock Shut" is her third appearance in print. Does this mean we'll have to

settle for every odd-numbered story that Adrian sells? If so, okay; we could do a lot worse than that.

When we sent **Timothy Zahn** one of our bio sheets after accepting "Hitmen—See Murderers," it came back filled with good stuff, including the fact that his novella "Cascade Point" was a Hugo Award winner in 1984 . . . and the fact that he has written a bunch of novels and has a list of about 50 shorter works to his credit (including "Clean Slate," in the January 1989 *AMAZING* Stories).

. . . And the fact that some of his favorite pastimes are crossword puzzles and 19th-century classical music . . . and his least favorite pastime is filling out author bio sheets. To which we have to ask: If you don't like to do it, Tim, then why do you do it so well?

For **Greg Costikyan**, creativity takes many forms. An award-winning game designer since the 1970s, he has begun to make a name for himself as a novel and short-story writer in the last couple of years. "After the War" is his second sale to this magazine (following "A Fairy Tale," September 1989).

"As an aging baby boomer," writes **Sharon N. Farber**, "I'm beginning to empathize with the dinosaurs."

Heck, Sharon, don't be so hard on yourself. Anyone who can come up with a story like "The Sixty-Five Million Year Sleep" is in no danger

of becoming extinct as long as this magazine is around.

Sharon has around 30 pieces of short fiction in print; "The Turf" (March 1989) is the most recent of her seven other appearances here.

The stories of **Robert Frazier**, both prose and poetry, have appeared in several magazines and anthologies over the last few years since his debut in print with "Dreamtigers" in the March 1987 issue of *AMAZING* Stories. "Erasure," his sixth prose offering in these pages, is unique for a very interesting reason—if you haven't read the story yet, try *not* to peek at page 60 until you have.

If you're familiar with what's coming out in the SF magazines, you must also be familiar with the writing of **Phillip C. Jennings**. One of the most prolific and most widely published short-story writers over the last six years, Phil marks his ninth appearance in this magazine with "The Galleon Gal." And because he's been writing good stories faster than we can publish them, we can already tell you that numbers ten and eleven are waiting in the wings.

When **W. Gregory Stewart** sent in "the button, and what you know," Greg *didn't* know we were moving away from publishing poetry. But we were glad to get this piece, because it's long enough, and strong enough—and *weird* enough—to stand as a story in its own right. Right? ♦

Book Reviews



For the first time in several years, AMAZING® Stories is devoting space to reviews of recently released and soon-to-be-published books. To provide us with information and opinions we can pass on to you, we're counting on three contributors whose reputations as reviewers are already well established.

John Gregory Betancourt (identified as JGB in the credit line at the end of his reviews) has been involved in almost every facet of publishing. He's the author of several SF and fantasy novels and stories, and was a reviewer for AMAZING Stories in the last period when the magazine used reviews as a regular feature (ending about five years ago).

John C. Bunnell (JCB) has written a regular review column, "The Role of Books," for DRAGON® Magazine since 1984, and will concentrate on reviewing science fiction titles for AMAZING Stories just as he leans toward fantasy in the reviews he provides for our sister periodical.

Charles Von Rospach (CVR) is the co-editor of the Hugo-nominated fanzine *OtherRealms*, for which (among many other things) he does book reviews. However—and this is true of the other two contributors as well—the titles he talks about in this space are described exclusively here, and these reviews won't appear in any other publication.

Fear

by L. Ron Hubbard
Bridge Publications, January 1991
190 pages, \$16.95 (hardcover)

The one-word description is that *Fear* is a curiosity. The prose and setting are quaintly formal; the characterizations are dated and arguably stereotypical. Yet the novel remains readable over fifty years after its original publication, both on its own merits and as a fascinating landmark in the evolution of the horror genre.

It's clear from the book's beginning that this is a period piece. In 1991, college professor James Lowry couldn't possibly be fired for writing an opinion piece for his local paper. And his wife Mary would be branded eccentric at the very least for her single-minded devotion to domestic matters. The setting, though, is idealized rather than outdated, combining elements of clarity and distance like a photograph that's sharp in the center and fuzzy around the edges.

The mundane academic milieu soon gives way to a series of bizarre metaphysical landscapes, as Lowry tries to recover a hat and an afternoon that have vanished from his memory. Disquieting and peculiar personalities crop up at every turn to challenge Lowry's perceptions as well as his determination, and eventually haunt him wherever he goes.

Despite the supernatural trappings, this isn't a tale of named mythological evils—rather, it's psychological suspense with more so-

phistication than might be expected from the slightly antique prose. *Fear* finds Hubbard continuing the macabre tradition established by Edgar Allan Poe, and Hubbard's James Lowry is a clear literary descendant of Poe's Montresor and Roderick Usher.

That's not to say that Hubbard's novel is the equal of Poe's classic short stories. For one thing, its focus is slightly off-balance. The philosophical questions raised as the book opens are sidestepped by a conclusion that favors surprise over thoughtfulness, and Hubbard's control of viewpoint isn't firm enough for readers to successfully unravel Lowry's experiences in light of the final revelations.

But if *Fear* isn't perfect as an intellectual exercise, it's still a distinctively old-fashioned story that recalls the days when tales of horror were meant to generate nervous shivers rather than disgusted scowls. That makes it something of a novelty in today's horror market, and more than justifies the story's resurrection from its fifty-year sleep. — JCB

Stoneskin's Revenge

by Tom Deitz
Avon, March 1991
307 pages, \$3.95 (paperback)

At first glance, *Stoneskin's Revenge* looks very much like just another new entry in just another fantasy series. But that surface impression couldn't be more misleading; Tom



Deitz's latest novel defies half the unwritten rules governing series adventures, belongs in at least two different literary categories at once, and generally displays more versatility between its covers than other authors have demonstrated in much longer careers.

Unwritten rule number one: you don't usually change mythologies in mid-series. Deitz's cycle of magic in back-country Georgia drew originally on Celtic lore; now, after a pair of transitional books, he presents a mostly independent adventure based entirely on Cherokee legend—specifically, on the mythical Spearfinger, an old woman with powers over earth and a morbid appetite for human livers.

The Indian material is distinctive both in presentation and content. Few other writers have mined the North American myths to date, and fewer still offer their findings with Deitz's smooth mixture of plain speaking and subtlety. Calvin McIntosh is modern, practical, and not at all sure of his command of a heritage that paints itself in broad elemental strokes. But his Cherokee birthright refuses to be ignored, and Calvin must elude enemies both magical and mundane as he struggles to balance his worldview.

The solid mythology, strong characterizations, and lively pace are consistent with Deitz's earlier work, making *Stoneskin's Revenge* the thoroughly readable fantasy adventure that might be expected from its

packaging. But it's equally accurate to define the book as a classic horror tale. Spearfinger is a ruthless, cunning adversary whose victims do not escape easily, if at all. And Calvin, sworn by necessity and honor to neutralize the danger she poses, ably fills the role of chief monster hunter.

Further enhancing the novel is its remarkably cogent treatment of shapechanging magic, which accounts for a substantial portion of Calvin's powers. It's not just that Deitz has thought through the physical limits of the ability (clothes don't change with you, and you can only take on a shape you know). The psychological consequences are covered with equal intelligence, and that lends an unusual conviction to the transformation sequences.

Part adventure, part horror, part personal odyssey, *Stoneskin's Revenge* is much more than "just another series book." It's a novel that takes a step past Deitz's earlier work, offering a story of no small scope from a writer of no small skill. — JCB

The Ragged World

by Judith Moffett
St. Martin's Press, February 1991
341 pages, \$18.95 (hardcover)

Readers looking for striking characterizations and intimate storytelling should find Judith Moffett's second book a rewarding experience. Those expecting intriguing science fiction on the order of her earlier *Penn-*

terra, however, are in for a serious disappointment.

More a collection of intertwined stories than a novel, *The Ragged World* finds Earth controlled by the unseen Gafr, who have forbidden humanity to procreate until the planet's ecology has been completely rehabilitated. The Gafr's agents are the diminutive Hefn, dwarflike aliens who have occasionally been mistaken for various sorts of faerie folk. The two species are linked in a mysterious symbiosis, and it is the Hefn who handle all contact with Earth and its inhabitants.

There's plenty of intriguing material in this premise, but Moffett virtually abandons it once the book's introduction is over. We learn next to nothing about the Gafr and the nature of their symbiotic hold over the Hefn. We get no explanation whatever of the vast mind-power with which the aliens enforce their decrees. We don't learn how a race with the Gafr's severely limited tolerance for industrial development established starflight capability. And there's no connection given between the aliens' ability to manipulate time and the rest of their mental and technological powers. For all the trappings of science fiction, Moffett's aliens might just as well have been from Faerie.

Fortunately, *The Ragged World* is almost entirely driven by its characters, not its plot, and calling Moffett's cast a fascinating lot understates their dimension. The deepest

portrayals are those of Nancy Sandford, a professor and scientist who has tested positively for the AIDS virus, and Liam O'Hara, whose musically gifted best friend dies when a Pennsylvania nuclear plant suffers a meltdown. Both are changed and driven by their personal crises, yet remain sympathetic, believable personalities; Moffett doesn't superimpose heavy-handed social or political agendas on either character.

It may be significant that five of the book's eight segments have previously seen separate magazine publication. As short fiction, the individual sections justifiably favor human interaction over technical nuts and bolts. Extensive technical background isn't needed to hold a reader's interest in a novella where character study is the focus. But in merging the various stories into novel form (and yes, the jacket clearly describes the book as a novel), Moffett fails to flesh out the larger issues and conflicts as she broadens her scope.

The Ragged World is certainly a strong collection of short stories, and perhaps even a well-crafted mainstream novel. But a quality science fiction novel doesn't raise questions without at least hinting at their answers, and Judith Moffett falls well short of that standard with this book. — *JCB*

Night of the Cooters

by Howard Waldrop
Ursus Imprints, February 1991
250 pages, \$25.00 (trade paper)

Some writers defy any attempt to have their fiction defined, and even actively enjoy the readers' inability to categorize them. Howard Waldrop is one such, thumbing his nose at those who feel the need to place labels on things so they fit into our favorite writing pigeonholes. Waldrop isn't "just" an SF or fantasy writer—he's someone who crosses the borders that define genre as though they weren't there, equally at ease with SF as with fantasy, horror, western, and comics. *Night of the Cooters* is an example of this wide-openness, showing off both his ver-

satility and the high quality of his short fiction.

Night of the Cooters is superb. What Waldrop specializes in is taking a generic situation and then having space aliens transplant Elvis's brain into it. The result is anything but generic, and always fascinating.

Take the title piece, "Night of the Cooters," a retelling of the H. G. Wells classic *War of the Worlds*. Waldrop has shifted the story from Grover's Mill to beautiful Pacheco County, Texas, and populated it with character actors from the B-movie Western days. If you can imagine Wells's Martians running smack dab into the sheriff from those old Dodge commercials . . .

Another story, "The Passing of the Western," isn't really a Western. It's not even a story about Western films. It's a fictional research article about a series of Western films made based on some real activity in the Old West—and it happens to be set in a universe similar to, but not identical with, ours, so things are just a bit different. It takes a while for you to realize that this is really a parallel-universe story as well as a Western. This is an example of the kind of melding between genres that makes the work in this book so different and interesting.

Somewhat more straightforward is "The Annotated Jetboy," which takes his story "Thirty Minutes over Broadway!" from *Wild Cards #1* and documents the research, the background, the homages and borrowings that he made from the comic-book world in his creation of his prose-based comic-book superhero. Jetboy was one of the best parts of the *Wild Cards* series, and I found it fascinating to see the research and background laid out—this kind of glimpse into the inner workings of an author is all too rare.

One of the best collections of short fiction I've read in a long while, *Night of the Cooters* is highly recommended. If you're interested, you can order the book directly from the publisher: Ursus Imprints, 5539 Jackson, Kansas City MO 64130. — *CVR*

The Hemingway Hoax

by Joe Haldeman
Avon Books, May 1991
\$3.95 (paperback)

Writers are fascinated by the act of writing. Go into any decent bookstore and look at the shelves of books about writing. There are dozens, from the "How to Spell Gud" references to "Make \$4,000,000 a year writing jingles." This probably shouldn't surprise me. The creative act is fascinating to artists of all types, but only writers can use their craft to write books about it. A musician can't sit down at a piano to create a piece on how to play the piano—to get the information across, he or she also has to be a writer.

There is a down side to this, though. If you don't care about writing, listening to a writer go into great detail about the craft can be brutally boring, as can anything where only one side is involved in the conversation.

That's one of the problems with Joe Haldeman's *The Hemingway Hoax*: The book is about Hemingway's mystical, missing first manuscript, the book that was stolen from him in 1922, never to be seen again. What was it about? What would it tell us about Hemingway? Could it be forged? And why is it an integral part of a science fiction novel? Those are all good questions, but only the latter is of real interest to non-writers.

John Baird is a professor and a Hemingway scholar who gets hooked by a con man into believing the two of them can write a bogus version of the missing Hemingway manuscript and get rich. Of course, it's not quite that simple. It turns out that the future of this universe (and other similar parallel universes) is at risk because of this bogus manuscript, so when they get serious about the forgery, the time-cops step in to stop them.

Haldeman obviously loves Hemingway and has studied him extensively. He is, however, a science fiction writer, so we have to add an SF-based plot so it can be sold to his audience—hence the parallel uni-

verses, the time-cops and the future of the universe hanging on the existence of the manuscript. The two pieces just don't merge cleanly, and while I felt the Hemingway pieces were interesting, I don't believe that non-writers are going to be as interested in Hemingway trivia as I was. The SF elements seem to be sketchily thought out, and the plot depends on a couple of inconsistencies in the reality-fabric that are never adequately explained. The major plot hole that bothered me (and excuse the spoiler) was that nobody ever explained to the reader why in this instance the effect of "fixing" the problem in one universe (by terminating the people involved) didn't ripple across to the other related universes. In all previous attempts to create the missing manuscript, it did, and this inconsistency either never got resolved or wasn't explained clearly enough for me to catch it. It smacks fairly strongly of *deus ex machina*, because if the standard procedure works as expected, this would be a very short book.

This book is simultaneously a science-fiction thriller, an homage to Hemingway, and a vehicle for showing off some Hemingway scholarship. It's obvious that a large amount of work has gone into this book, but I'm not sure what practical use it will be other than as inspiration for other people who want to write novels about Hemingway. Toss in some sex and some hard-boiled blood & guts and what you end up with, unfortunately, a muddled and unconvincing book which has lots of interesting elements that never quite merge together into anything special.

Overall, a disappointing work from an author who can do much better. My father, who's a minor Hemingway scholar, will probably love it. But I have to wonder who else is going to want to sit through this much Hemingway trivia. This is really a book by a writer for other writers. — CVR

Science Fiction in the Real World

by Norman Spinrad
Southern Illinois University, 1990
234 pages, \$14.95

I've been disappointed in the quality of SF criticism for a while. We have a number of different reviewers, but criticism is a different beast. Reviewing a book is the act of helping someone (you, the person reading the review) decide whether or not to spend your money on it. Criticism, on the other hand, is an act of education—good criticism is better read after the work, not before, when it can help you improve your understanding and allow you to better appreciate a work in the context of the field and the world. Writing good criticism is hard work and takes a large body of knowledge in the history and traditions of the field, which is why it's so rare.

Science Fiction in the Real World, a collection of articles by Norman Spinrad, is the first criticism I've read since David Hartwell's *Age of Wonders* (1984) that I've felt was worth the time I spent on it. Some of the material was originally published in his column in *Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine* (although it has been revised, in some cases significantly), while other material is new to this book.

When this material was originally published in *Asimov's*, I wasn't very impressed with it—partly because I think my own view had not yet matured and partly because the first few columns weren't very good and I stopped reading them. My mistake.

This book is a fascinating look at the field from someone who is part of the SF field and has the knowledge needed for an in-depth critical analysis while still standing far enough away to give us an outside perspective. Some of his comments, those on Hard SF, Cyberpunk and his "Science Fiction vs. Sci-Fi" (excepting the nasty Orson Scott Card diatribe I'll discuss in a minute, where he uses a fire-axe instead of a scalpel) are right on.

"Must There be War" is another good one: a cogent look at why SF has been dominated by the war nov-

el—killing in space, killing on far-away planets, killing at home—and what the implications of that fact are.

The best pieces in the book, however, are his profiles—one on Ted Sturgeon and Kilgore Trout, one on J. G. Ballard, and a third on Philip K. Dick. Even though I'm not a big fan of Dick, Spinrad's essay touched me on so many levels that I can recommend this book for this one piece alone.

What turned me off originally to his columns still shows through in this book, although somewhat muted. Some of his columns carry a strong taint of the Ellisonsque Angry Young Man tilting at windmills syndrome. Spinrad doesn't have the ability to carry on a literary attack the way Ellison does, nor should he want to. (For that matter, Ellison rarely seems to be able to these days, either. You can only make so many issues critical to the future of humankind before you trivialize them all.)

Spinrad has also twice made what can only be considered personal attacks on Orson Scott Card—discussions that moved beyond the realms of criticism into a personal jihad against another writer. A subtext of "I'll get you" is clearly part of the work; this bothered me when I first read it and it continues to bother me on rereading. Fortunately, this is the only time in the book that Spinrad shifts from being critical (sometimes highly critical) and simply becomes mean-spirited and abusive, but it should never have happened at all.

If you're interested in doing more than reading science fiction—if you want to learn where it's been, what it is and where it's going—then I can highly recommend *Science Fiction in the Real World* as your textbook. Until I read this book, I had underestimated Norman Spinrad as a critic. I won't do so in the future. To order direct from the publisher, write to Southern Illinois University Press, Box 3697, Carbondale IL 62902-3697. — CVR

Smart Dragons, Foolish Elves

Edited by Alan Dean Foster &
Martin H. Greenberg
Ace Books, April 1991
352 pages, \$4.95 (paperback)

Smart Dragons, Foolish Elves is a theme anthology of cute, humorous or just plain silly fantasy stories. Everything in the anthology has been printed previously, ranging from the brand-new "Up the Wall" by Esther Friesner to Horace L. Gold's "Trouble with Water," first published in 1939.

Some of the works will probably be familiar to you. Roger Zelazny is represented by his "Unicorn Variations," which I'm not really sure fits into the theme very well. Harlan Ellison's "Djinn, No Chaser" is much more appropriate and a very enjoyable piece. My real interest in the book are the older and more obscure works. Gold's piece was one of the better pieces in the book, which shows that good fiction can stay fresh through the years. The same with Avram Davidson's "Or the Grasses Grow," which was funny, but had a serious aspect as well. In "Snubug," Anthony Boucher's 1941 piece, we see exactly why the idea of returning to yesterday with a newspaper isn't really a good idea.

Not all of the stories work that well. Robert Silverberg's "As Is" draws an occasional chuckle, but isn't really funny and is pointless to boot. "Up the Wall" is not Esther Friesner's best piece and just left me cold. The one-joke shorts are represented, also, with Robert Sheckley's "The Same To You, Doubled" and Mike Resnick's "Beibermann's Soul." If you like that sort of thing, great. I generally find them to be closer to extended monologues than fiction, although Resnick's is fairly original. Sheckley's, on the other hand, goes on way too long for what was an old joke long before he wrote this one.

Is this volume worth getting? On balance, I think so, since there are a number of works worth owning that you'll have trouble finding otherwise: the Boucher, the Gold, the Davidson, Nina Kinski Hoffman's

strange "Savage Breasts" (not an old piece, but previously published in a limited edition book), and William Tenn's "My Mother was a Witch." This isn't an anthology to save for the grandchildren, but after a hard day's work when the last thing you need is a book that makes you think, this is the kind of book you'll want to grab. A good evening's entertainment with very few outright clinkers. — CVR

Full Spectrum 3

edited by Lou Aronica, Amy Stout, and Betsy Mitchell
Doubleday Foundation, June 1991
512 pages, \$19.95 (hardcover),
\$12.95 (trade paperback)

The latest entry in the *Full Spectrum* series, edited by three of Bantam's science fiction editors, is (as might be expected with so many people involved) a mixed bag: there's something for almost everyone's tastes. It includes work by many established authors (James Morrow, Ursula K. LeGuin, Norman Spinrad, Poul Anderson [a play], Barry N. Malzberg, and Michael Bishop) as well as some (relative) newcomers (Nancy Willard, Mark L. Van Name & Pat Murphy, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Peg Kerr, Jack McDevitt, Patricia Anthony, Marcus Donnelly, Ted Chiang, Kevin J. Anderson, Karen Joy Fowler, R. V. Branham, Elizabeth Hand, and David Zindell). There are also two authors represented by translations: Joelle Wintrebert and Wolfgang Jeschke.

There are several first-rate stories. Topping the list is James Morrow's truly bizarre science-fantasy "Daughter Earth," in which a couple conceive and give birth to a "biosphere"—a small, living planet, complete with continents, oceans, and evolving lifeforms. Although it's a bit overly moralistic in the end, its power comes from its ability to make you care about the characters, and suspend your disbelief. As the lead story in *Full Spectrum 3*, it sets an interesting tone for the rest of the book. The other obvious choice for "Best Story" is Michael Bishop's "Apartheid, Superstrings, and Morde-

cai Thubana," a strange, powerful, and at times quite surreal anti-Apartheid morality tale. "Apartheid" is reprinted from the Pulphouse chapbook of the same name.

The *Full Spectrum* series is supposed to represent the best in the genre, and pretty much does so within specific boundaries. (Noticeably lacking here is any truly "hard" SF in the vein of Forward or Benford.) It's a very human-centered anthology series, largely about regular people coping with impossible events in improbable situations . . . which usually works as a recipe for good "soft" SF stories. — JGB

D'Shai

by Joel Rosenberg
Ace Books, February 1991
327 pages, \$4.95 (paperback)

Joel Rosenberg is best known for his *Guardians of the Flame* series, about a group of role-playing gamers who find themselves in a real fantasy world, in the bodies of the characters they created. (A somewhat hokey idea, yes, but Rosenberg is a good enough writer to pull it off, primarily because he treats the subject seriously: if someone gets hurt, he's really hurt. If someone dies, he's really dead, and it's not going to change.) He has also published several science fiction novels, all reminiscent of Heinlein at his best. Which is to say: this Rosenberg guy can really write.

Now Rosenberg is embarking on a new series for a new publisher, and it's an interesting change. The world of D'Shai is not like anything in his other books . . . and indeed, like no other fantasy world yet explored. Here, the people are divided into a three-level caste system: peasants, middle-class, and nobility. All people have a special talent, called Kazuh, which can aid them in a specific manner. Acrobats, for example, who raise acrobatic Kazuh will perform complex stunts perfectly, with no danger to themselves. Your Kazuh can also change your caste—a peasant who can raise a warrior's Kazuh can join the society's other warriors, for instance.

Unfortunately for our hero, Kami Khuzud, who belongs to an acrobat family-troupe, his Kazuh isn't for acrobatic talent; he doesn't quite know what it does. He's also in love with a noble girl, which is a real problem since acrobats are (technically) peasants. When his chief rival for the girl's affections is murdered, Kami becomes a suspect. Much of the plot is concerned with unraveling the mystery.

The pacing is slow for the first fifty or so pages, but when the story finally kicks into gear, it's well worth the wait. It's a fascinating world, with strong characters. I'm looking forward to future volumes. — JGB

The Infinite Kingdoms

by Michael Rutherford
Owlswick Press, December 1990
183 pages, \$25.00 (hardcover),
\$12.50 (trade paperback)

Michael Rutherford has only published three stories (one as a chapbook, two in *Weird Tales*), and they're all collected here. Why, you may well ask, would a publisher put the first three stories of a little-known new writer into a beautiful illustrated hardcover (or trade paperback) book? The answer is easy: with these stories, Rutherford has shown himself to be the best alternate-world fantasy writer currently practicing. Think of Ursula K. LeGuin's poetic style combined with the vigor of Robert E. Howard's prose and you may get an inkling of what the stories in *The Infinite Kingdoms* are all about.

In "The Tale and its Master," a young, too-proud storyteller is sent on a quest to win his position in the Guild of Seers, Speakers, Dreamers, Storytellers, and Non-Fanatical Prophets: he must find a new story somewhere in the world and bring it back. But the story he gets from a witch is much more than he bargained for...

"The Tale and Its Master" is seamless, a little masterpiece; it was picked up for one of the Best of the Year volumes from a small press chapbook.

In "Wager of Dreams," crass ma-

terialism is sweeping through the world. If people can't see it or touch it, they won't believe in it—which will spell doom for the creatures of dream, who thrive on belief. So the last Dreamer must, on their behalf, spread the stuff of nightmare through the world again, to rekindle the imaginations of the Infinite Kingdoms' people. It's an interesting, more adult story than "The Tale and its Master," with plenty of attention to the nature of dreams.

And finally, in the novella (and heart of the book) "Knights of Darkness, Knights of Light," we have a dark, brooding sword & sorcery tale: that of Apollyon, the last Demon Champion, sent out into the world of man disguised as a man. It seems the human souls harvested by demons in their last invasion of the Infinite Kingdoms (which feed the demon young) have grown tainted, and need to be replaced. Apollyon must scout the way for his people. When a (human) mercenary warrior, Ragnack, accidentally saves Apollyon's life, their destinies become entwined. The denouement is one of the most exciting and vivid depictions of war in a fantasy setting I've yet found.

If your local specialty store doesn't carry Owlswick Press titles, you can order directly from the publisher: Owlswick Press, P.O. Box 8243, Philadelphia PA 19101. — JGB

The Host

by Peter Emshwiller
Bantam Books, May 1991
358 pages, \$4.50 (paperback)

The Host is a first novel, with many of the flaws usually associated with first novels: an inconsistency in tone, a reliance on luck and coincidence (rather than skills) to save the protagonist, and some questionable linguistic extrapolations (one example: in a relatively near-future New York, nobody uses first names like Fred or Jim or Mary or Ethel; instead we have Watly [the protagonist], Narcolo [his uncle], and Sentiva [one of the villains], etc.).

Despite all that, the book has a certain page-turning power. It kept

me reading to find out what would happen to poor Watly Caiper, who is thrust into troubles he never expected when he signed up to be a Host.

Hosts are lower-class people who let the rich temporarily take possession of their bodies for nights out slumming in the underworld. (Manhattan has been divided into two sections by a second street level about five stories up; the rich live in the sunlight and clean air, and the poor live below, in the glare of electric sunlight.) When Watly's host ascends to the top level and commits a murder, Watly is framed for it. Of course, he runs and tries to prove his innocence, thereby dragging his uncle and his only friend into the mess with him.

It's not all that believable, but the pacing is brisk and Emshwiller shows promise. In later novels, as he polishes his prose and gets more mastery over the form, he may become a talent to watch.

And, if you're wondering about his name, he's the son of Ed "Emsh" Emshwiller, one of the best science fiction pulp-magazine artists. His mother, Carol Emshwiller, is a fantasy writer as well, so he comes by it naturally. — JGB ♦

Publishers:

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the button, and what you know

W. Gregory Stewart

I this is the button and
what you know about it:

1. that it is a button—
you know this.
2. that it has suddenly
appeared before you.
3. that the button is



Illustration by Richard Mandrachio

attached to a plate;
that the plate is attached to nothing else—
that it floats.

4. that this floating is taking place 2 feet or
half a meter in front of your immediate face.
5. wait—there is more.
the button and the plate are gray,
but not the same gray, each.
these are strange grays, matte and yet translucent,
and fading, dark to light and back again.
first the button is darker, and then
the plate is darker, and although
the color changes are gradual and shifting,
the button and the plate are somehow *never*
the same gray at the same time.

it may be that this is important.

but it probably isn't.
6. beneath the plate, and likewise floating,
and having appeared just as suddenly,
and appearing just as oddly two-toned,
is a plaque bearing the words
ALL OR NOTHING.
7. oh, yes, a cylinder—there is a cylinder
floating vertically beside
the button and its plate
and the plaque beneath. it is light gray
at its bottom-most, and darker above;
you will notice over the next hour
that the light gray grows in extent—tomorrow
at this time you will notice
that the light gray takes up 1/7
of the total length of the cylinder,
and this will tell you something,
or should, at any rate.
8. here is something else
that may—or may not—be important:
the button has appeared to you
on a crowded city street, and although
you are not alone, no one else
seems to notice the sudden appearance
of disfixed plates and buttons
and plaques and cylinders. or else
they do, but do not find it strange—
you yourself choose not to ask
anyone if they see these things,
even though you *do* find them strange.
9. and this, too—the gray configuration
remains before you no matter what direction
you go. this makes it all seem personal, somehow.
you do not dwell on this right now, but
within two hours you will find it fairly annoying.

10. one more thing—the cylinder floats to the left
of plaque and plate.

it may be that *this* is important.

but it probably isn't.

II this is a part of what you *do not* know
that might help:

1. a similar assemblage has appeared
to each of 26 other individuals.
no two of these
live on the same world,
and of course no two worlds
are within the same galaxy.
2. note the use of the word 'similar'
in section II.1 above—in some cases,
what has appeared
is indeed a button, while
in certain others,
it is a toggle switch,
or a rocker switch,
or a touch pad. in two instances
it appears as things that I cannot describe.
I take on faith
that the function remains the same,
but I cannot guarantee this—
it *looks* like it, though.
3. although different languages—and
representations—are involved
the message stays the same: ALL OR NOTHING.

sometimes the concept is a single word.

sometimes it is not written
as you understand writing,
but is nonetheless transliterated
or recorded—audially, telepathically,
or psychotactilely. in any case—
ALL OR NOTHING.
4. none of you 27 is a leader of any kind.
5. no one of you is a scientist or theologian.
6. you are all unexceptional, and you have all
just recently lost your jobs. (coincidentally?)
7. here are the races of the rest of you.
 - a. saurian.
 - b. cetacean.
 - c. canine, but unfortunately
too similar to the Chihuahua
to ever be made welcome at a Ho-Jo's.

- d. bat. pink. and it swims.
- e. rodent. hamsteroid, actually—its kind might eat a disobedient child simply to make a point to its surviving siblings.
- f. molluscan (octopuscan).
- g. lemur.
- h. elephant.
- i. cetacean—this one is smaller, similar to a narwhale, but the tusk spirals in the *other* direction.
- j. arachnid.
- k. arachnid.
- l. arachnid. (note: there are too many spiders in the universe. I say this entirely without prejudice.)
- m. Daffy Duck. (you never even suspected, did you?)

next are those one step removed from your own biologic.

- n. an intelligent hollyhock whose greatest fear is premature pollination by a rogue bee.
- o. a rogue bee.
- p. manticore.
- q. a streetcar actually named Desire.
- r. a collective intelligence, the individual components of which look remarkably like spiders. (sigh . . .)
- s. a bad attitude looking for a place to land—but it may be that you are more familiar with this than I suppose.
- t. star maggot.
- u. tuna surprise.
- v. robo-droid, programmed to sell life insurance.

with the last you will have no common ground or basis at all for understanding:

- w. a silicate lump with career goals.
 - x. a rock, aging.
 - y. a pool of industrial waste that has outlived its creators.
 - z. something else.
8. each cylinder is calibrated to the local time appropriate to the place/space/displacement in which it has materialized yet all are so synchronized that, when one finally becomes uniformly gray, all 27 will have become uniformly gray . . .
9. . . . which might suggest that time is running out.

10. the last thing that has anything to do with this that you do not know is what to do.

III apparently you must make a decision:

- 1. whether to push the button
- 2. or not. to push. the button.

IV you decide that you really need to think about what you know, and you are right. here are what you think about.

- 1. ALL OR NOTHING. is that NOTHING if you push the button— or NOTHING if you don't?
- 2. does NOTHING mean that nothing will happen— whatever you do— or that the universe as you know it will cease to exist? or something in between? or . . . (just give it a rest, will you? it's in there somewhere.)
- 3. ALL presents similar problems; but at least you think you have a pretty good handle on OR.
- 4. is all of this really happening, and if so, does it really *mean* anything— anything at all— let alone justify the cosmic paranoia that you are now just beginning to entertain?
- 5. oh yeah—and why *you*, assuming sanity?
- 6. but even assuming anything else (and on the other hand), why not?
- 7. and, hey—who the hell is responsible for this, anyway? and are they sure they really want you? (and isn't *that* just 'why you' again?)
- 8. well. maybe a decision isn't really required— perhaps you can just sidestep the issue. (and don't you believe it, Roscoe.)
- 9. what's the point?
- 10. what's for dinner?

V after nearly a week of this, you finally decide that you *will* push the button, and you suppose that you must push it at the end of the week,

at precisely the same instant that the cylinder goes uniformly gray. (yes—absolutely correct! a good call on your part, by the way.)

you have decided to do this thing because either you have gone entirely Bozoid and it will therefore make no difference whatsoever to universal cause and effect, or you are entirely sane, and it might.

further, you have decided that only a benevolent entity would have set up the game this way—evil as you know it would have forced the issue at the first appearance, rather than giving you a week to decide. well, you think—benevolent, or *incredibly* indifferent; nearly the same thing. as it happens, you are spang-on about the benevolent bit (but entirely wrong to generalize about evil as you have, given your limited experience; still, no matter—the lucky guess is still correct).

but you are not home free, not yet and not by a long shot—because here's another thing you don't know:

each of the 27 of you will have to push its button at the same time as the others.
or else NOTHING, you see—
ALL OR NOTHING. (yes, I grant that a comma after ALL would not have been amiss . . . but, then, I didn't make the rules. did I?)

ok, ok—I'll tell you what the NOTHING part is. the big NOTHING. the end. over, out, squat, kaput, that's a wrap. time, space and all points between, done. that's all. auf flipping wiedersehen.

at any rate,
it is a good thing, that you decided as you have.

(now, at this point, you may be wondering about the nature of benevolence, given what I said before about evil. let us address this: benevolence within this context is giving you the choice of allowing the universe to continue, or of packing it in. you see, at this end of things, quite a number of potential neo-universes and eager little possible creations are shoving and crowding and elbowing their way to the front of the line, blinking in and out of existence and waiting for the next Big Bang—but nobody else gets a turn until whoever is IT is done. you see? you don't? no, of course you don't—well, it doesn't matter, anyway.)

VI each of you has come to this same decision (although of course you do not know this, because you are unaware of each other's existence)—

each of you, that is, except for one of the damned spiders (see—I *told* you!), who is still waffling through it all . . .

VII . . . while time is running out.

VIII all right, all right, all right—to make an interminable story less so, the spider—at the last possible instant—decides to hit its touch pad (and so throw in with the rest of you, although it doesn't know this), and the known and unknown universes are saved. at least for now.

IX you know none of this, however. having pushed your button, you only know that nothing on your little planet and nothing in your sorry little life has changed. and you are right. (and that was the point of the exercise.) here are some things that have not happened:

1. planets falling into their suns—any more often than usual.
2. Planck time.
3. the sudden appearance of a transgalactic black hole looking for a party.
4. the immediate and universal total decrease of entropy.
5. or the opposite.
6. new age accordion recitals.
7. or anything much else out of the ordinary for a vast and unencompassed creation.

X but as I say—you know nothing of this. go home. go to sleep. the button is gone. you might find work tomorrow. or you might not. ♦

What We're Up To

(Continued from page 4)

a very specialized non-necessity at that—we have to try that much harder to persuade you to part with some of your disposable income.

We're very good at *trying*, a fact that I hope is apparent from the contents of this issue and its predecessor. But it'll be a few more issues, at least, before we know how good we are at succeeding. The jury is still out. The jury is you.

And then there's the flip side of the first approach, looking at things from the high-numbered viewpoint:

Compared to the national debt or the population of stars in our galaxy or the number of goosebumps I got when I agreed to take this job, 559 is not much. Compared to the number of issues produced by most magazines before they fade into history, 559 is phenomenal. And that's how many issues of AMAZING* Stories have been produced, from April 1926 until right now.

What we're up to is to perpetuate all of the good accomplishments that this magazine has recorded over the decades. Sure, we're facing toward the future—the magazine of the '90s and the magazine of the '20s and '30s won't have much in common other than their name—but we still want to keep an eye on the past.

This magazine has had as many personalities as Sybil, but one thing it has never been in any of its incarnations is boring. When history judges what we do with, and in, and to this magazine over the next few issues or the next few years, I sure hope "boring" is one word that does *not* come to mind.

I guess it could go without saying that this magazine is not afraid to take chances: the evidence of that fact is sitting between your right hand and your left hand.

Risk-taking has been part of the editorial modus operandi around here ever since Hugo Gernsback decided that the world was ready for a magazine devoted to "scientification"—and then proceeded to give the world exactly what it didn't realize it

wanted. The risk paid off: *Amazing Stories* was an instant success.

Almost twenty years later, editor Ray Palmer took an enormous risk when he started running seemingly endless installments of the so-called "Shaver Mystery." Readers either loved it or hated it—but the point is that *thousands* of them had an opinion one way or the other.

Nearly forty years after that, the magazine was moribund and in danger of being discontinued. The company then known as TSR Hobbies took a risk in buying the property, primarily and simply because the people in charge didn't think the magazine deserved to die.

And almost ten years after *that*, TSR, Inc., has taken the risk that may turn out to be the riskiest of all. The assumption we're all making on this end is that although AMAZING Stories has a grand and glorious past, it has the potential for a grander and even more glorious future. Without TSR's intervention, the numbering of the world's first SF magazine probably would have ended at 505. What we're up to now is trying to make sure that number *never* stops growing.

What sorts of chances are we going to take, issue by issue, to help keep this magazine from being boring? Some of the answers to that question are on these pages; others were in the issue that preceded this one, and more will be in the issues that follow. To some extent, every piece of writing we present in these mid-1991 issues is a risk-taking enterprise—because, as I pointed out 91 pages ago, we really don't know much about what you want.

But that's a copout; no magazine editor *ever* knows ahead of time whether a particular story is going to fly or flop. That's what makes this job so . . . umm . . . interesting.

Even so, most editors who have held their jobs for any length of time have at least a general idea of what that magazine's audience expects. In our present position, we don't have that luxury—so we take chances.

Reinstating book reviews is a risk. Are you happy to see us spending six pages in every issue to give you a brief critical look at some of the books you can buy . . . or would you rather see that space used for another piece of fiction instead?

The "Looking Forward" feature is another risk. Are you intrigued by a glimpse at novels that are about to hit the store shelves, or would you rather wait and get the whole book at once when it comes out?

I'm taking a chance by filling these two pages; a regular editor's column has not been a standard feature of this magazine for the last few years. Do you care about what I might say in this space? (Don't ask me to predict what I might say, because I don't have the slightest idea.) Or would you rather see this space used for something more worthwhile, such as . . . ?

We plan to use some space for letters from readers—a feature that not every SF magazine indulges in, and one that has not been a regular part of this magazine for a while. A good idea, or should we un-plan?

Are we taking a chance, one that we might not even be aware of, by *not* doing something we could be doing? These are not leading questions, but issues I think we need to get on the table: Do you want to see interviews with or biographies about authors and other personalities in the field? Would you be interested in articles and essays about film and video as they pertain to SF, fantasy, and/or horror? Should we make room for articles and reviews about computer games?

We know *what* we're doing, and after you've taken a look at this magazine, you'll know too. But we don't know *how* we're doing, and the only one who can tell us that is you. What's your verdict? ♦

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